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FACETS
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The Market Place

FLIP OF A COIN, available from Paula Truelove and Jenny McAdams, 502 McKeithan St., Apt. 4A, Talahassee, FL 32304. New HF zine dedicated to all his roles. Premiere issue contents by Magee, Wickes, Benedict, Taero, Berger, Lybarger, Barilla and others. $3 deposit and SASE, made out to Two Sons and a Brother Press. ((Haven't seen this one yet, folks, but it's an impressive lineup!)) Contributions being accepted for future issues.

WARPED SPACE, available from Lori Chapek-Carleton, 5132 Jo-Don Dr., E. Lansing, Mich. 48823. SW/ST/sf/media zine, and still the best buy for the money on the market. Current ish (just out) #48. For info on back issues, etc., drop Lori a line at above address.

FOUR FOOT ONE, available from Mary Carson, 38 Park Ave., Oakville, Ontario, Canada L6J 3X8. Proposed one shot based on the film TIME BANDITS. Looking for poems, stories, character studies, cartoons, etc. Tentative publication date: July 1983.

BAD KARMA AND OTHER FALLACIES: THE MOST OF KESSEL RUNDOWN, available from K. Sheperd Tibbetts, 13207 Chalfont, Fort Washington, MD. 20744. Comedy SW zine featuring "the best, worst, funniest and most scatalogical bits" from the zine. 250-300 pages, computer typed and reduced. New contributions accepted.

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LEGENDS OF LIGHT, available from Susan Voll, 507 Carthage Dr., Xenia, Ohio 45385. New SW zine containing 2 major stories, short stories, art, poetry, articles, and more. $3 and SASE to reserve a copy; make checks payable to POOZ Press.

SOLO VENTURES, 3454 Castle Glen Dr., #113, San Diego, Cal. 92123, has several irons in the fire. ARCHAEOLOGY 101, a Raiders zine, 50 pp., typed reduced, offset. $5.75 first class. EMPIRE REVIEW, current ish #4, 90 pages computer typed, reduced, $8.00. SW zine. Please make out checks for A101 to SOLO VENTURES, and ER orders out to EMPIRE REVIEW.

FIELD STUDIES: FROM THE NOTEBOOKS OF DR. INDIANA JONES, available from Cheree Cargill, 457 Meadowhill Dr., Garland, TX 75043. RAIDERS zine, devoted to everything from his babyhood to his future with Marion. Contributors include Benedict, Weddell, Draves, Baker and Rogow, Cargill, Martynn, Lybarger, and Virgil. $5 and SASE to reserve copy. Make check payable to Cheree Cargill.

MELANGE, available from Pandora Publications, Barbar Fister-Liltz, 8601A W. Cermak, N. Riverside, Ill. 60546. Media-oriented anthology that derives material not only from current media (SW, ST, Starsky and Hutch, etc.) but the oldies-but-goodies too. Movie tie-ins perfectly acceptable, as are book series tie-ins. 5½x8 reduced copybook format. Contact Barbara for further info. Publishing date: May 1983.

STAR WARS ENCYCLOPEDIA, available from Skyler Walker and M. Sliwoski, 537 N. 66th, Seattle, WA 98103. 83 pp., commentary, descriptions definitions, etc., from a variety of sources on the SW universe. $6.85 first, $6.00 third or SASE for flyer.

CITYSPEAK, available from 622 N. Henry, Madison, Wis. 53703 ((no name, folks, sorry)). BLADE-RUNNER zine, providing a fannish network for praise, gripes, opinions and anything else on BR anyone would like to say. 15 pp., reduced. $6/4 issues.

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TAUNTAUN EXPRESS, Dagoblogg Press, Dave Olden, Box 15-805 Cecil Blogg Dr., Victoria, B.C. V9C 3H8 Canada. 200+ pages. SW/ST/sf/GALACTICA/fantasy/MAN FROM ATLANTIS etc. $7 first class.

DOCKING BAY, available from Cyndi Hartman, 5114 Highcrest, Rockford, Ill. 61107. SW/RAIDERS. SASE for availability of #2. #3 contains work by Rhienmuth, Crist, Brin, Davenport, Telford, Barnes, Walton and Faraci. SASE for more info.

THE PRINCESS TAPES and TPT: THE PROLOGUE, available from Krystarion Press, c/o J.A. Low, 2500 Fontaine, Greensboro NC. 27407. Offset, reduced with gorgeous four-color cover. SASE above address for prices. ((Recommended))

FORUM, KathE Donelly, 6302 S. Spottswood, Littletown, CO 80120. A central clearing house concerning all aspects of fandom. Published every 6 weeks, listing complete current info on all zines, out of print, in process, proposed and still available zines, plus much more. SASE for more info. ((Recommended))

JELLY BABY CHRONICLES, Paulie Gilmore, 39 Bennett St., Pontiac, MI 48058. DR. WHO zine devoted to the 4th Doctor (Tom Baker). #1 $6 first class, holiday ish $6 first class. #2 due out May 1983. SASE for more info. ((Highly recommended!))

ROSCIUS MAXIMUS: Paulie Gilmore (see above). Devoted to the career of David Warner. Contents #1 include a NIGHTWING prequel and a TIME AFTER

TIME sequel. #2 due out soon. SASE Otter Limits Press for more info. Also, THE DAVID WARNER FANDOM NETWORK, an authorized fanclub for Mr. Warner, is looking for members. SASE above address for more info.

Suzanne Jenkins, 4720 NE 74th Ave., Portland, OR 07218, has photos for sale. Send long SASE with 2 20¢ stamps for lists of material on a huge raft of photos and many other items. SW/HF/TESB/RAIDERS and much more.

WANTED: A good VHS video copy of HANOVER STREET. Will pay reasonable price. Sue Doelling, 32 MacArthur, Closter, NJ 07624.

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PAUL FREEMAN FANS UNITE! Let's get to know each other and share knowledge and comments. Belloq isn't all that bad ... Please enclose SASE with your letter for a reply. Jean Duranti, 909 N. Palm Ave., W. Hollywood, CA 90069.

THE THOM CHRISTOPHER FAN CLUB: This authorized club is for all you Hawk fans. SASE for more info to: 917 N. Wayne, #302 Arlington, VA 22201. If you are an artist or writer currently working with Hawk/BUCK ROGERS material and are interested in being included in the newsletter or year book please send xerox copies and return SASE to TCFC Publications, 900 Leverton Rd., Rockville MD 20852.

WANTED: anything and everything on HF, also Mark Hamill, Carrie Fisher, Sean Connery and Malcolm McDowell. Will buy or trade for photos. Also interested in trading photos for videotapes (VHS format) of films. Write to: Leonard May Brecht, c/o Bauer, Hof Guldenwerth 72, D-5630 Remschied 1, West Germany. ((Highly recommended))

GORDON CARLETON STUDIOS PRESENTS: stationery! That's right, now you can have your favorite Carleton cartoon on stationery or note cards. 33 different cartoons to choose from including "Purina Humanoid Chow" "Vulcan Weed", and the ever-popular "Souvenir from Alderaan". SASE Gordon at 5132 Jo-Don Dr., E. Lansing, Mich. 48823. ((Very highly recommended!!))

COMLINK, Regina Gottesman, 100 W. 94th St., NY, NY, 10025. A letterzine taking up where ALDERAAN left off. SASE for current info.

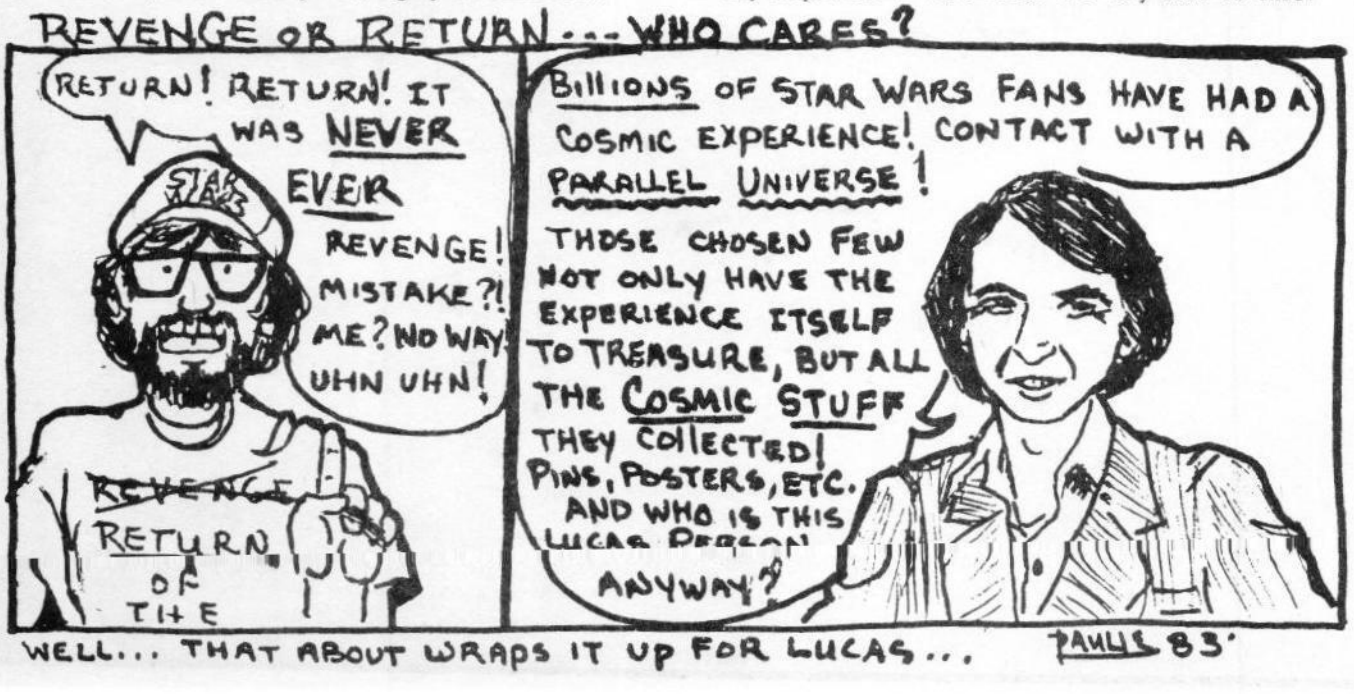
SNAKE PLISSKEN FANS: Lori Carleton is looking for you! An ESCAPE FROM NEW YORK zine is in the works, and looking for contributors. SASE her at the WARPED SPACE address.

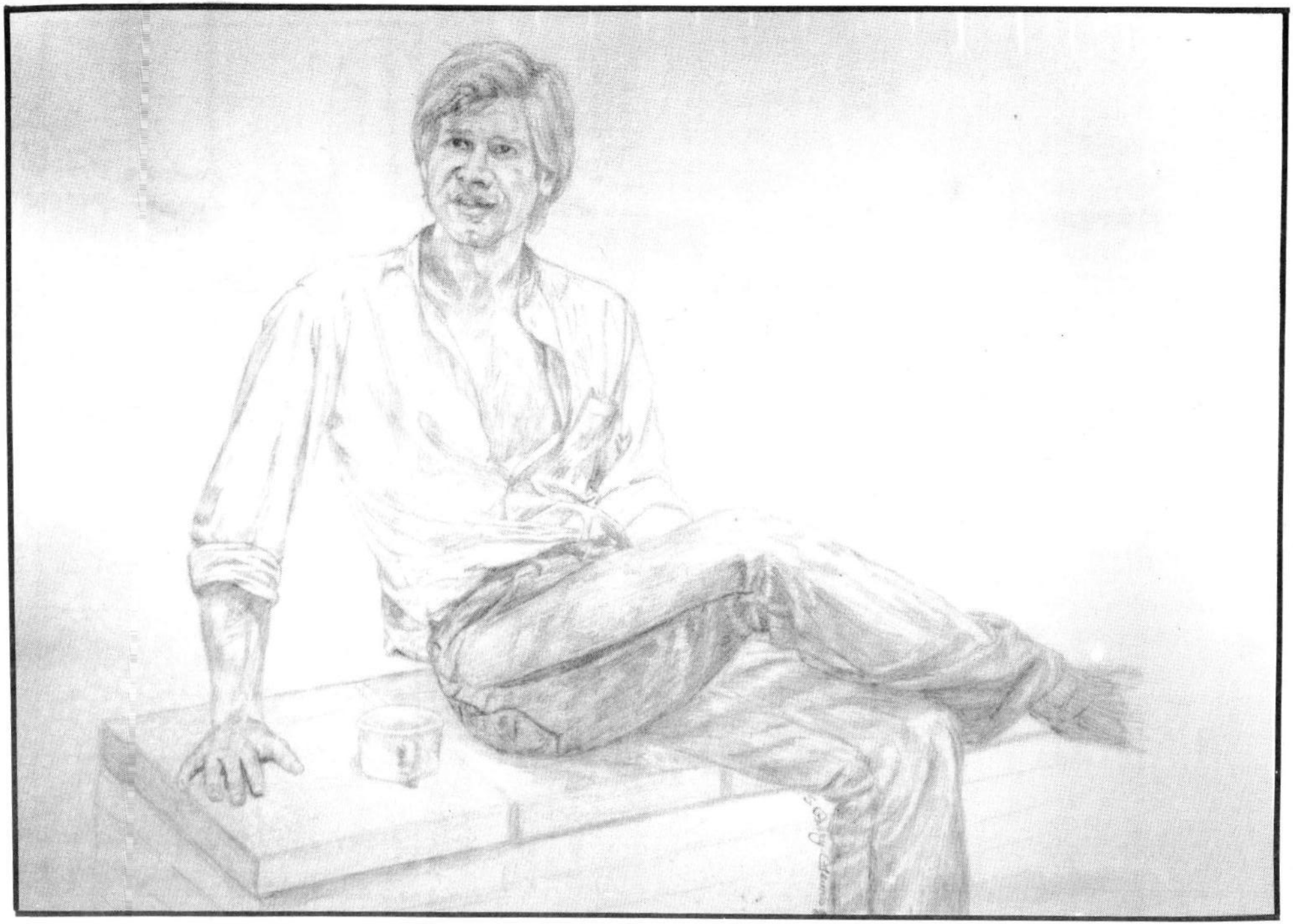
INDY/FORD FANS! FANS OF FORD is an info/letter zine. Looking for submissions of letters, info and filler art. Subscriptions: 4 issues/#10. For more info write Becky Novak, P.O. Box 6152, Ft. Lauderdale, Fla. 33310

T'KUHTIAN PRESS has a host of goodies to sell: SYNDIZINE is based on both movie and TV shows. #2 contains continuations of "Rat Patrol", "Hill St. Blues", Starsky and Hutch", "Shogun", "Time After Time" and much more. $11.45 first, $10.35 UPS. OBSC'ZINE features mostly ST material of an adult nature. Age statement is not required, but order at your own discretion. #5 is $7.05 first, $6.50 UPS, $6.40 third. SNOW ON THE MOON is a one-shot collection of Anji Valenza's Klysadel series. $11.45, first, $10.35 UPS, $11 third. SASE for more info on these and other projects (including the upcoming DRACULA II) to the WARPED SPACE address, and specify on the envelope (and inside, too) which item you're inquiring about.

READERS OF THE LOST JOKE: Gordon Carleton's storyboarded poster of the adventures of intrepid archaeologist Michigana Jones is printed on 11x17 65 lb. gold parchment in brown ink, in a limited, numbered edition. This is a collector's item! Price: $3.25 first, $4 UPS, $4.30 Europe,$4.75 Australia. Won "Best Cartoon" at World Con 1981. SASE Gordon at WARPED SPACE address.

REMINDER FROM YE EDS: ALWAYS send a SASE with any inquiries -- zine folks are very fond of that!


REVENGE OR RETURN... WHO CARES?
RETURN! RETURN! IT WAS NEVER EVER
REVENGE! MISTAKE?! ME? NO WAY! UHN UHN!
REVENGE
RETURN OF TH E
BILLIONS OF STAR WARS FANS HAVE HAD A COSMIC EXPERIENCE! CONTACT WITH A PARALLEL UNIVERSE!
THOSE CHOSEN FEW NOT ONLY HAVE THE EXPERIENCE ITSELF TO TREASURE, BUT ALL THE COSMIC STUFF THEY COLLECTED! PINS, POSTERS, ETC. AND WHO IS THIS
ANYWAY?
WELL... THAT ABOUT WRAPS IT UP FOR LUCAS...
PAULS 83'



Mallowan and his wife exchanged glances again. Belloc came forward, all urbanity.

"I deeply regret dropping in so informally like this. I was exploring the possibilities of establishing a dig of my own in the area, but you seem to have -- as our American friend would say -- beaten me to the punch!"

"Yes, -- well, since you're here, you might as well have a look at the place. We've been doing a good deal of digging out the streets of the city -- it was the Capital, you know, although not much by our standards." Mallowan led his visitors to a wide workroom, where two young men and a woman were busily putting clay pots together from the shards that had been collected. "We've found quite a lot of pottery, tablets, and that sort of thing -- this was, after all, mud-brick country, so to speak! Mr. Jones, what do you make of this?"

Indy looked over a scrap of clay, and assessed it as being interesting: "It's cunieform, but an advanced style -- and it goes into Persian script --"

"Obviously, if the place changed hands in a single night?" Belloq sniffed. "Have you found anything but pottery?" he asked, trying to disguise his eagerness.

"Oh, you've heard about that too, have you?" Mallowan said.

"Really, Max, it's impossible to keep anything a secret here in the East?" Mrs. Mallowan sighed.

"Then I'd better show it to you, before you perish of curiosity!" Mallowan led the group through the workroom to a tiny office at the back of the house. It was obviously the center for business for the dig. There were ledgers, files of correspondence, and a rather old-fashioned looking safe.

"We have to keep it in here," Mallowan explained. "The workers are a dreadfully superstitious lot. If they thought we had it, they'd leave in a body. As it is, my wife is always worried that someone will try to steal it, for the gold, you know."

Mallowan fiddled with the dials, unlocked the safe, and took out a shining yellow cup; a beaker-shaped vessel of gold, with abstract designs worked into it.

Belloq stared greedily at the Cup. "May I?" he asked, reaching for it.

Indy restrained himself from grabbing. Mallowan held the Cup up to the window so the others could see the markings incised on its sides.

"It's nothing like the local stuff," he pointed out. "The style is completely different. The inscription isn't local, either. And it's at least a hundred years older than anything else we've uncovered to date."

Indy did some quick figuring. "The Babylonians conquered Judah at least two hundred years after Solomon --"

"But this Cup could have been used in the Temple after Solomon's time," Belloq said.

"But if it had been made before then? If this actually was one of the original vessels used by the priests in the Temple of Solomon --" Indy let the idea hang in the air.

Mallowan returned them to the 20th century. "Well, that's that. I thought you'd like to see it, since you came all this way. I'd better put it away for a bit -- don't like to let these things get about. Everybody's always after gold objects these days. They don't care who made them, or why --" Mallowan glared at Indy.

Mrs. Mallowan stepped into the breach. "What my husband is trying to say, Mr. Jones, is that you have a certain reputation for tracking down objects without following up on the civilizations that created them!"

Indy smiled. "I guess you've been talking with Dr. Ravenwood, ma'am. Sure, I go after things, but I do care, very much, about the people who put them where they did -- and why they made all those clever traps for the unwary!"

Belloq laughed, a rich fruity chuckle. "Indy, your sins have found you out! But you will have a hard time removing the Wall from its resting place!"

"Assuming, of course, that it is the one we're looking for," Mallowan said. Mrs. Mallowan did not follow them back to the main room of the house. Instead, she stayed in the office, frowning. Something was not right, she thought, and she wondered what she could do about it.

Some hours later, Indy and Belloq had joined the rest of the dig at the site.

"Provenance!" Mallowan exclaimed. "We found the cup right here." He indicated a spot marked with a red staff and a flag. "If, as you suspect, that cup was used at Belshazzar's feast --"

"Then it would be near where the feast took place," Indy finished. "But why didn't the Jewish exiles try to get it back, when they were allowed to return, during the time of Nehemiah and Ezra?"

"Possibly because the Cup has been lost in the rubble of battle," said thoughtfully. "See, here, in the mud-brick, there is a mark, as if a fire had been lit --"

"Aha! The Persians got in under the watergates, by turning the river out of its course," Mallowan said. "There would have been mass panic -- fires set, the usual rapine and slaughter --"

"And the king's palace would have been the last to go." Indy said. "Now my theory is that the Writing on the Wall was exactly that -- and the only reason the Babylonians couldn't read it was that it was in the wrong alphabet?"

Belloq and Mallowan stared at him. Indy flushed, and went on. "What I mean is this: Belshazzar and his people used the cunieform ideographs. They'd been using them for centuries. The Jews used the Phoenician letters, adapted to their own language, what we now know as the Hebrew alphabet. Wen the God of the Hebrews wrote, it was in the language of the Hebrews, using the Hebrew alphabet. That's why they had to send for Daniel, the leader of the Hebrews, to read it!"

Mallowan blinked. "So simple! But why could the Lord not write in the tongue of Belshazzar, using the local letters?"

"Perhaps, to give the conquerors time to complete their handiwork?" Belloq guessed. "How shall we fathom the ways of the Almighty? But you will never prove your tidy little theory, my young friend, --"

"Unless Mallowan, here, has found the Wall," Indy said.

Mallowan shrugged. "That's still a theory," he said diffidently.

"Give me a trowel, and we'll see," Indy said.

"Enthusiastic, isn't he?" Belloq commented, as Indy joined the workers in the trench, scraping dust of centuries away from the mud brick walls of Babylon's [illegible]

The outer wall of the palace had been uncovered by the time the gong rang for dinner. Mallowan looked doubtfully at his guests.

"We dress," he said dolefully.

Belloq smiled and said, "I usually carry a dinner jacket, just in case I meet civilized people."

Indy shrugged. "I can eat with the hired help," he said. "I travel light."

"Oh, I daresay we can find you a clean shirt, Jones," Mallowan said. "My dear, Mr. Jones and Dr. Belloq are going to stay the night. We're getting quite close to something that Jones has been after. Pity not to let him in at the finish."

"Oh, quite. Our cook here does marvelous things with goat meat, Dr. Belloq , Mr. Jones --"

"I can lend him a shirt, Americans aren't quite so formal as we are," Mallowan explained.

Mrs. Mallowan smiled sweetly. "You must tell us about your travels, Mr. Jones. I've heard such tales of your doings --"

She continued to burble irrelevancies as she led the two into the house. "We're a little short of room at the moment, I do hope you don't mind, but I've had to put you into the same room -- not the same bed, of course -- but we're going to build a guest-wing next year --"

Belloq and Indy both drew deep breaths when the lady left them alone together. "That woman should have been stifled at birth," Belloq said savagely.

"I thought she was kind of nice," Indy said. "What are you after, Belloq ? The Cup?"

Belloq smiled. "Perhaps, Indy. A find like that -- locked up in a safe that anyone could open with a hairpin."

Indy shook his head. "Mallowan got it, Mallowan should be able to keep it," he observed.

Belloq merely smiled and applied himself to the business of dressing for dinner.

The various members of the dig joined the Mallowans and their sudden guests for conversation and cocktails before dinner. It was all terribly British. The men were in some kind of dinner jackets, the women had applied make-up and changed from serviceable trousers to filmy dresses. Mrs. Mallowan played hostess, in a flowery print that reminded Indy of the ones worn by middle-aged matrons in Indiana.

The goat was edible, and the rest of the evening was given over to shop-talk. Names were bandied about, theories were picked to pieces, and by the end of the evening, Mallowan was convinced that the two visitors were exactly what they said they were.

"I think you're barking up the wrong tree, my dear," he told his wife, as they were preparing for bed. "This Jones is young, but he's quite knowledgable on Biblical archeology, and Belloq's reputation is well know. He's been to the Sorbonne, knows all the right people --"

"He says he does," Mrs. Mallowan corrected her husband. "Mr. Jones reminds me of some of the men I nursed during the War. There was one, a sergeant, who had to be watched quite carefully at meals. He would slip bits into his tunic, to give to the others, who were on strict diets! Not dishonest, you understand, just eager to have his own way, and quite ruthless about it oo! As for Dr. Belloq, remember that fellow in Harley Street? The one they caught dealing dope to his patients?"

"Good heavens, you don't mean the man's a dope-smuggler!"

"Certainly not! But he might very well be mixed up in a shady scheme or two. I should be very careful about them, Max."

"Well, dear, I will be very careful."

The dig was quiet. The sleep of centuries was still upon the palace of Belshazzar when the early-morning gong sounded.

Indy and Belloq rose, groaning. They had passed the night in close proximity and it had not increased their love of each other. Belloq wondered how anyone could sleep while Indy snored, and Indy wondered how anyone could sleep with the reek of Belloq's hair-oil in his nostrils. They partook of a hurried cup of coffee and a piece of Arab bread, and followed Mallowan to the dig. The Arab workers were already hauling baskets of debris out of the trench. The wall which they had so carefully uncovered the day before was still intact.

"We'll have to break through the ceiling," Mallowan decided. Indy and Belloq stifled their eagerness while the Arab crew attacked the dried mud with pickaxes. The sun was clear of the horizon when Mallowan told the crew to stop and go elsewhere.

"I think we've got the interior wall now," he said. "This is fine work. Care to try, Jones? It's your project, after all."

Indy knelt down and began to scrape carefully, inch by inch, laying bare the brick wall that had been covered for over two thousand years. Belloq was beside him, all differences resolved. For this day, at least, they were colleagues, intent on finding the very place in which the Hand of God had written the mystic letters.

They were still at it when the noon gong sounded. They had scraped off the sand from the inner wall, revealing the tips of a pair of painted wings.

"We've got it!" Mallowan exclaimed. "This must be the king's chamber! Those are the characteristic winged lions. The flakes of gold paint prove it --"

"Damn!" Indy laughed exuberantly. "Mallowan, this is it! We're going to see it today, if I have to work all day and all night --"

"Not in this sun!" Belloq glanced up into the sky. "You're not a fool, Indy. Better take the siesta, and come back when the sun is lower -- or you may never make it back to write your little paper!"

Indy flushed, as much with chagrin as with sunburn. Belloq could afford to sneer, with the Sorbonne behind him, but Indiana Jones was still plain Mister.

Mallowan, half-way to his own Doctorate, sympathized with his American guest, but agreed with Belloq.

"Better rest, Jones. The Wall has stood for 2500 years -- it won't run away now!"

They were met at the house by a brouhaha that had been building all morning. Mrs. Mallowan came rushing up, followed by the dig's secretary, Mrs. Garvey, another Englishwoman, of tall and leathery aspect.

"Mr. Mallowan, a dreadful thing has happened," Mrs. Garvey shouted.

"The Cup -- it's missing!" Mrs. Mallowan added.

"What do you mean -- missing? I put it into the safe yesterday," Mallowan said.

"I went to get the cash-box, for the pay-chits," Mrs. Garvey said, as they followed Mallowan through the work-room to the office. "And I noticed that it was gone!"

Mallowan twirled the dails and opened the safe. Where the Cup had once stood was now an empty space. He stood and faced his two visitors.

"Gentlemen, I cannot believe that any of my people took this object. They has every opportunity to do so before you arrived. Not only that, but I trust all of them, implicitly. I don't know anything about either of you, except by reputation, and my wife tells me that neither of you is particularly scrupulous about were you collect your finds. I don't like this -- but I'm going to have to search your belongings!"

Indy looked astonished. Belloq looked affronted.

"How dare you -- you are accusing me, Rene Belloq , of theft? Outrageous!"

"He's right, you know," Indy said. "He doesn't know either of us from Adam's off-ox. But you can take my word for it, Mr. Mallowan -- I may pick up things that are laying around, but I wouldn't take something that another man claimed, no matter what Ravenwood said."

"I don't know about Ravenwood," Mallowan said firmly. "I am going to go over your land-rover and your baggage, right now!"

Belloq flung open his satchel with a melodramatic gesture. "As you can see, I have nothing but my own clothes, a book or two, and my toilet preparations. There is no false bottom to my bag --" he shook it convincingly.

Indy led Mallowan and his wife to his car. "Nothing up my sleeve, nothing in the car, nothing in the bag."

"I should not like to think that one of our own people did this, and tried to put the blame on two visitors," he said. "We shall have to make a search of the premsis. I'm sorry, but luncheon is postponed for a bit. I must take care of this matter first."

Indy and Belloq accompanied Mallowan on his tour of the building. Each room was searched, and each room contained only what it was supposed to contain. The work-room had pottery in various stages of repair, and six plaster molds hardening on a shelf. The office ontained business papers, and nothing else. The Cup has vanished.

The group sat at luncheon looking suspiciously at each other. Mrs. Mallowan tried to make light conversation. It was hard going.

"It's like something out of a mystery story, isn't it?" she said at last.

Belloq said sourly, "I do not read the romans policiers, Madame Mallowan, and I do not like being suspected of a crime I did not commit !"

Indy looked thoughtfully at Mrs. Mallowan. "You know, it is kind of mysterious, the way that Cup just disappeared."

Mallowan looked distressed. "We'll have to send for the District Commissioner. He's all the way in Baghdad; it'll take a week to get him here, and in the meanwhile we'll all be under suspicion. What a ghastly thing!"

Indy looked at the sun. The search and lunch had taken enough time to lower the angle of the sun's rays on the diggers' heads.

"If you don't mind, Mallowan, since I've got to stay put, I'd like to get back to the dig. I want to be able to set up my cameras once we find the Wall --"

Belloq shrugged Gallically. "For once, Indy, you are being sensible. Instead of sitting like a criminal in the dock, I shall join you in this work. Mr. Mallowan cannot object?"

"Object? I'll join you! We can't send for the D.C. until the official land-rover gets back from Basra anyway. Might as well do something constructive with our time!"

The three men hurried back to their precious wall. The diggers had uncovered the wings of the lions, the flakes of ancient paint still clinging to the mud-brick. Indy traced the impressions of cuniform letters, pressed into the mud-brick over two thousand years before.

"This is it," he announced. "This inscription proves it. It's the declaration that the work on this room was done by the Master Builder of Nebuchadnezzar. And Belshazzar was Nebuchadnezzar's successor. The feast was his Coronation celebration --"

Belloq and Mallowan scraped carefully at the wall. Bit by bit the painted lions were exposed to the light of day, bare shadows against the pale brown of the brick.

Indy yelped as he turned over another inch of soil to display a charred line on the brick.

Mallowan and Belloq stopped their scraping. Indy croaked out, "Come here I think I've found it!"

Together the three of them worked, lifting the desert sand away from the charred wall. They scarcely breathed, lest they distrub the fragile fabric of the masonary above them. Painstakingly, millimeter by millimeter, they laid bare the Words written by the Hand of God on that fateful night 700 years before Jesus walked on the earth.

Indy traced the letters with a shaking hand: "Mem, nun -- mem, nun -- tau, japh lamed -- fe, shin, nun --- I was right! Hebrew!"

He pulled his hand away from the wall. The letters were smoking! As Mallowan, Belloq and Jones watched, the Writing on the Wall blazed fiercely, then crumbled into ashes.

Above them, the masonary began to tremble. With a whisper, a rush, a roar, the wall fell, while the three of them scrambled for safety.

They stood on top of the rubble, staring down into the remains of Belshazzar's palace.

"If I hadn't seen it, I wouldn't have believed it," Mallowan said at last.

Indy sighed. "I should have had my cameras ready," he said. "Now I'll have to ask you to write an explanation -- and they still might not believe it --"

"I can write whatever you like, but there's this matter of the Cup to be settled first," Mallowan remained him.

Indy nodded. "I've been thinking about that," he said. "Can we make a deal? I'll find your cup, and you call off the dogs?"

Mallowan laughed. "You get that Cup back, and I'll write whatever you like!"

"Belloq," Indy asked the Frenchman. "Can you corroborate me, for the record? You won't get out of here until the Cup is found -- and I don't think you're guilty -- not this time!"

"Merci! I am astonished that you ask me, after our little contretemps, but I do not wish to spend my life on this particular dig!" Belloc said.

Mallowan frowned. "Where is the Cup, Jones?"

Indy started back to the house. "I was thinking, while I was working on that wall, about something your wife said -- the Cup was lost, like a mystery story. One of the best is 'The Purloined Letter', where the missing letter was in plain sight, all the time." Mallowan and Belloq trotted after Indy, wondering what he had in mind.

Mrs. Mallowan was typing at a table in the main room when Indy strode in, the other two close behind. "What on earth --" she began.

Mallowan stopped her. "Mr. Jones thinks he knows what happened to the Cup."

Mrs. Mallowan flushed. "Really? But where is it, then?"

Indy went into the work-room. "There were five of these plaster molds here last night," he said. "Your people were working on one when we left for the dig. They are working on another now -- but there are seven of them on the shelf!"

He unwound the bullwhip from his belt. The two youngsters stepped away from the table in alarm.

The whip flicked out at one of the molds. It broke, revealing a clay jar. Again the whip cracked, and another plaster mold broke. A third time -- and the Cup stood, with bits of plaster all around it.

Indy turned to Mrs. Mallowan. "I don't blame you for not trusting Belloq," he said, "but you might have given me the benefit of the doubt."

Mallowan shook his head. "Really, Agatha! It wasn't at all necessary!"

Belloq looked smug. "As you see, I am exonerated. My young friend has been most clever. Indy -- we shall meet again. If you like, I can add my signature to Mr. Mallowan's. We found the Writing on the Wall -- Mene, Nene Tekel, Upharsin."

"You have been weighted in the balance -- and found wanting," Indy translated.

"I wonder which one it meant?" murmured Mrs. Mallowan.

Max Mallowan was expansive. "I don't suppose I can persuade you to stay another night? It will take a bit of time to work up a good paper on that find --"

"I've got to get back to Baghdad," Indy said. "Just send it along when you can. I trust you!"

"As for me," Belloc said, "I have urgent business in Basra. Madame Mallowan, good-bye. It has been -- most interesting?"

The two land-rovers were already waiting for their respective passengers. Indy looked at Mrs. Mallowan and smiled. "Y'know," he said, "you ought to write a mystery story of your own some day -- Mrs. Mallowan."

Agatha Christie Mallowan looked at her husband and said, "Yes, I might just do that."

Max and Agatha walked back to the house as the two cars zoomed down the road in opposite directions. "You really ought to put those two into one of your books," Max said.

Mrs. Mallowan shook her head. "Oh, no. I couldn't possibly. No one would believe me."

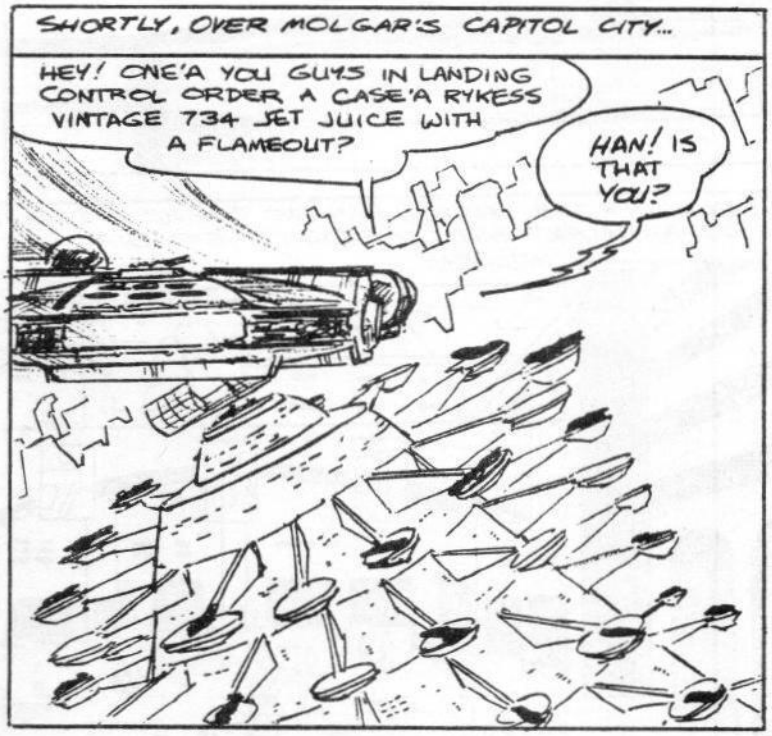
STAR WARS
FROM THE EXPLOITS OF
HAN SOLO
INTRODUCTORY NOTE:
IN THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK, THE SITH LORD DARTH VADER GATHERED TOGETHER A FEARSOME GROUP OF BOUNTY HUNTERS TO CAPTURE THE MILLENIUM FALCON AND HER CREW.
BUT, BEFORE THAT TIME...
...ONE OF THOSE BOUNTY HUNTERS, THE SERPENTOID BOSSK HAD HIS OWN ENCOUNTER WITH THE FALCON'S CREW.
THIS IS THAT STORY.
in BATTLE with...
BOSSK
STORY AND ART BY TIM ELDRED
1981

TRAFFIC IS THICK OVER PLANET MOLGAR... FOR THIS IS THE TIME OF THE ANNUAL PLANET-WIDE TRADE SHOW, AND STARSHIPS OF EVERY SIZE AND SHAPE POPULATE THE SKIES...
...ONE IS THE MILLENIUM FALCON.
HA! WE MADE IT... RIGHT ON SCHEDULE!
RRAUGG!

HAN SOLO AND HIS FIRST MATE CHEWBACCA GUIDE THE FALCON INTO PLANETFALL...

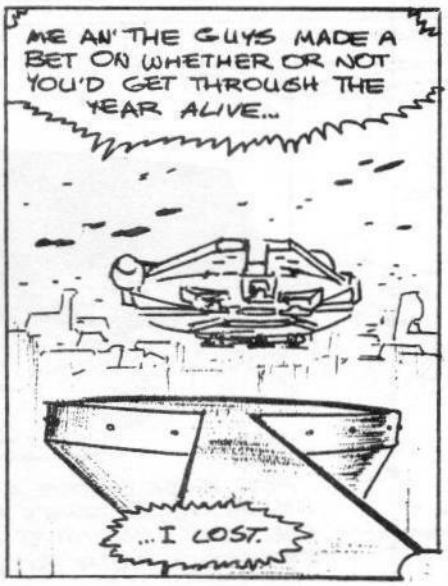
...BLISSFULLY UNAWARE OF THE TWO JET-BLACK EYES: COLD, UNBLINKING...
...THAT MONITER THEIR EVERY MOVE.

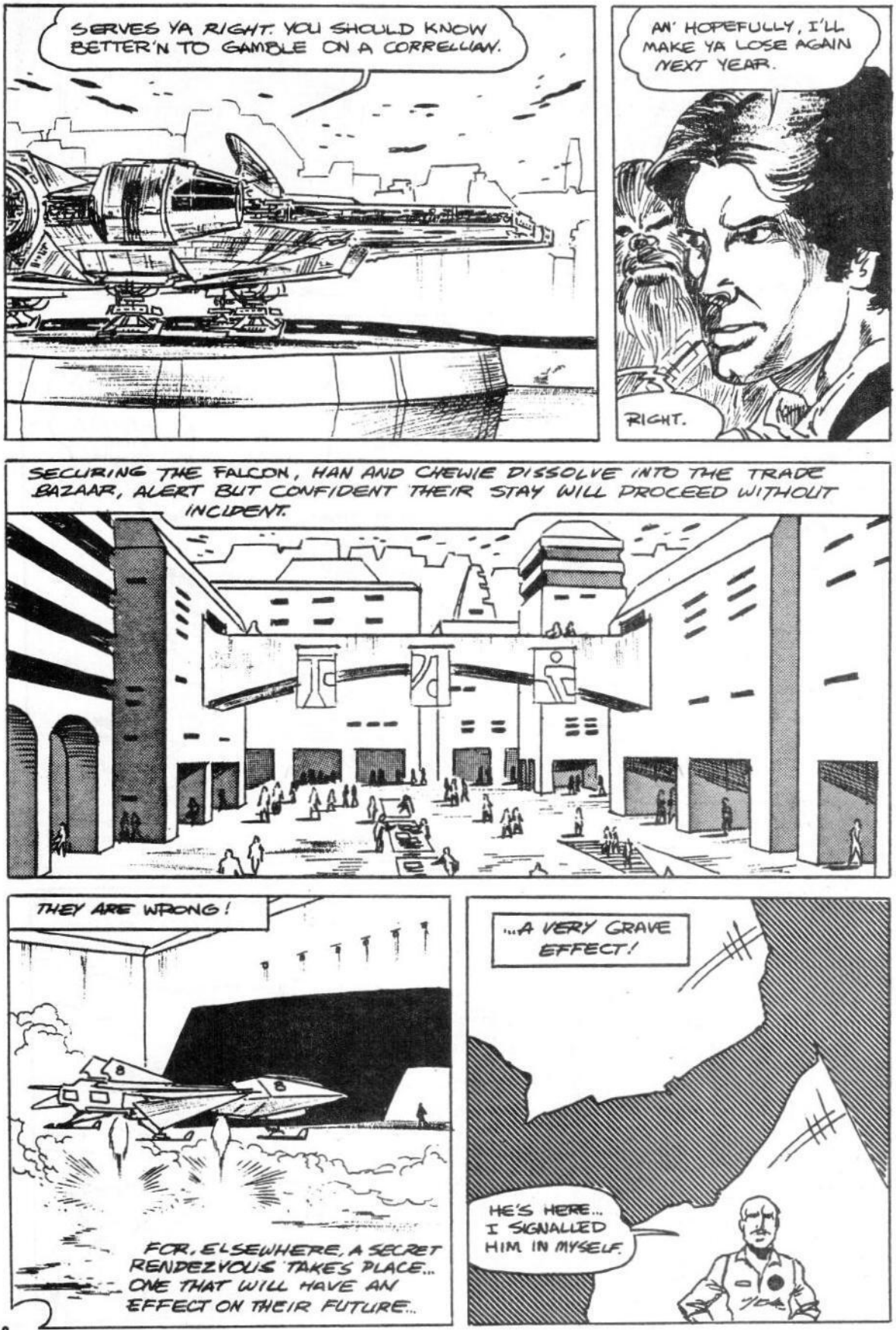
IN A MATTER OF MOMENTS, A "BORROWED" SECURITY SHUTTLE BREAKS OUT OF FORMATION...
... AND FOLLOWS.


SHORTLY, OVER MOLGAR'S CAPITOL CITY...
HEY! ONE'A YOU GUYS IN LANDING CONTROL ORDER A CASE'A RYKESS VINTAGE 734 JET JUICE WITH A FLAMEOUT?
HAN! IS THAT YOU?

THE ONE-AND-ONLY, MISTER DUMA!
RIGHT. YOU'RE OPEN FOR APPROACH ON PAD 347.

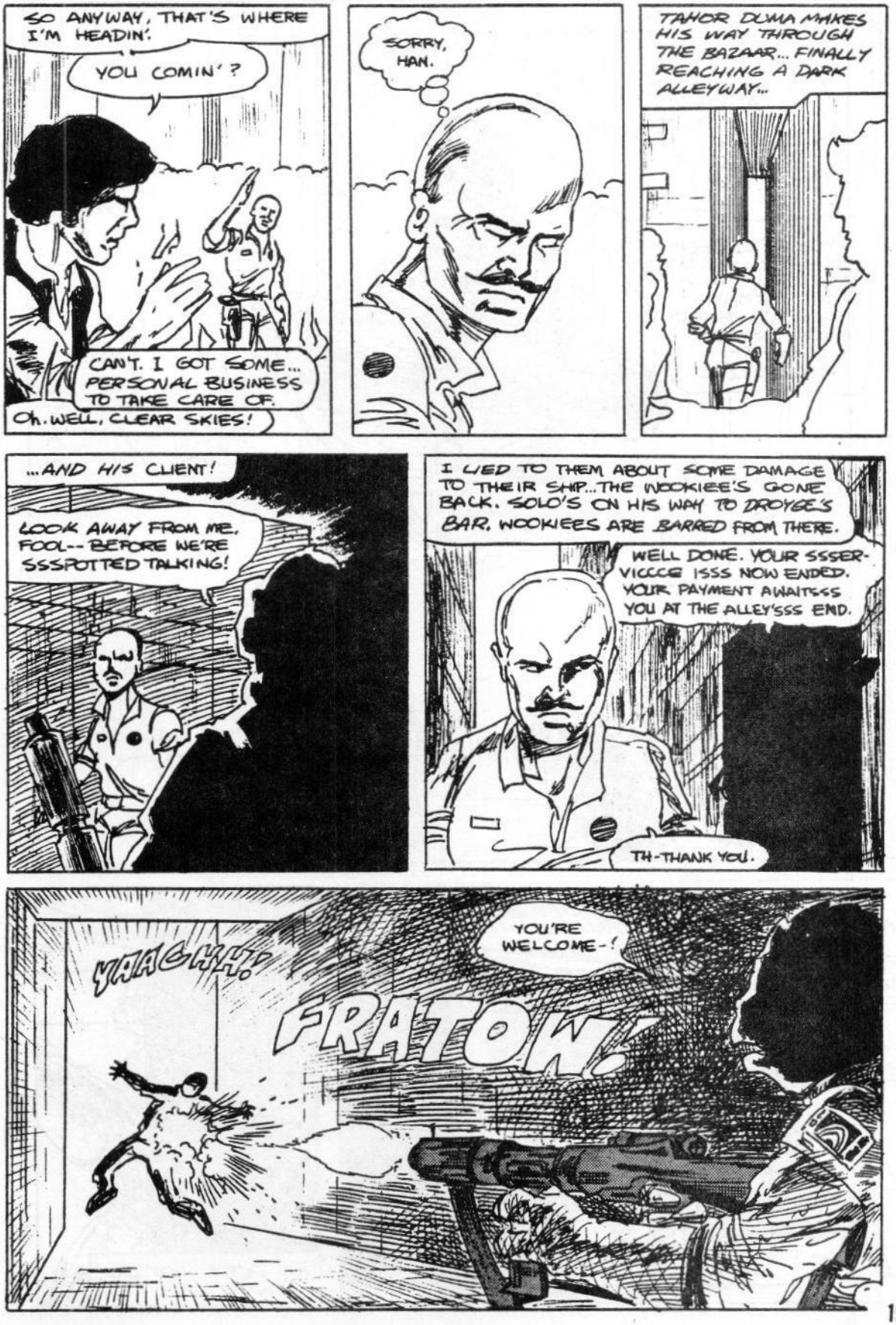
NO NEED FOR THE FORMALITIES, TAHOR.. I KNOW WHICH PAD'S MINE... YOU RESERVE IT EVERY YEAR FOR US!
I ALMOST DIDN'T THIS YEAR, HAN...

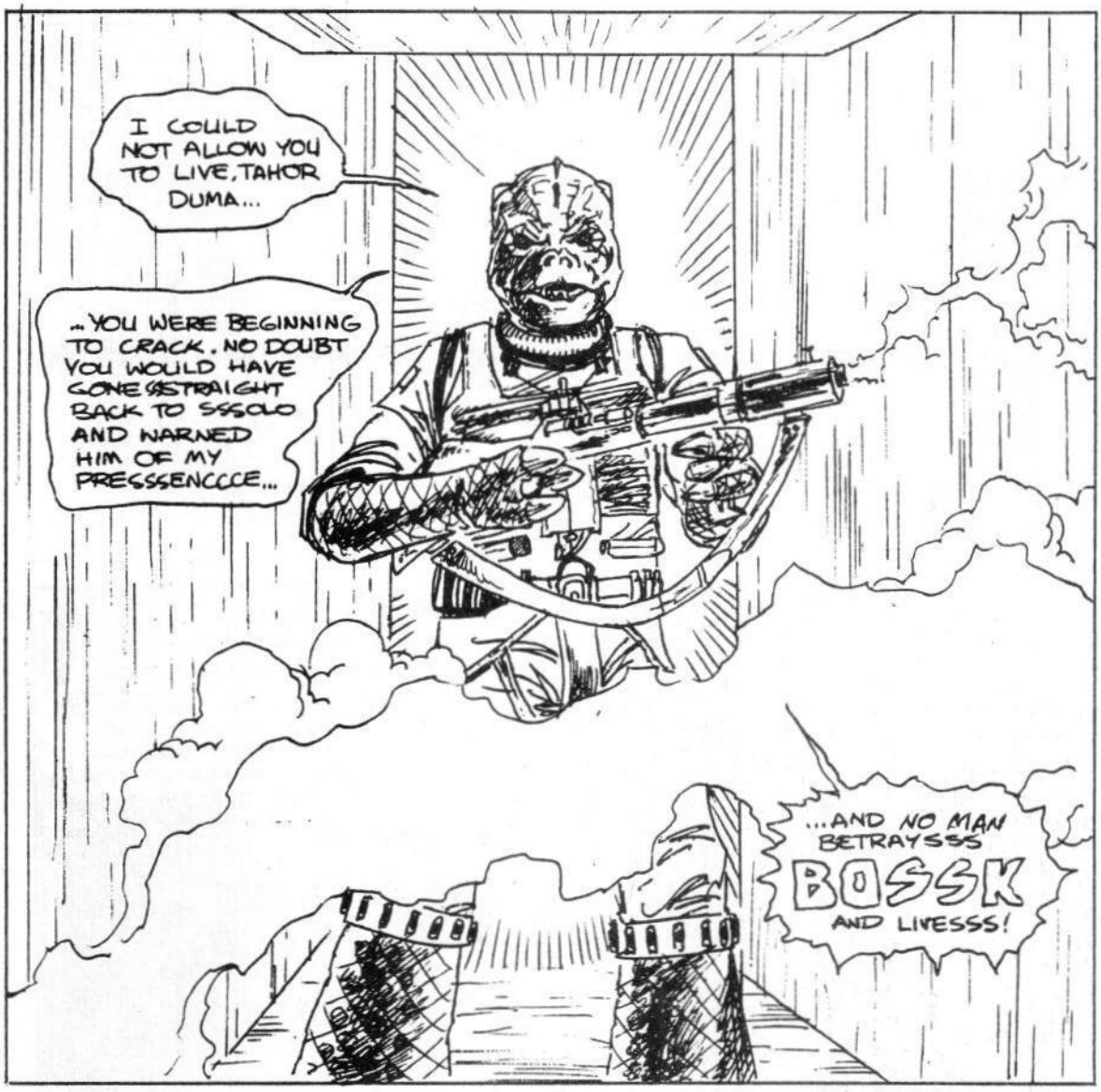

ME AN' THE GUYS MADE A BET ON WHETHER OR NOT YOU'D GET THROUGH THE YEAR ALIVE...
...I LOST.


SERVES YA RIGHT. YOU SHOULD KNOW BETTER'N TO GAMBLE ON A CORRELLIAN.
AN' HOPEFULLY, I'LL MAKE YA LOSE AGAIN NEXT YEAR.
RIGHT.
SECURING THE FALCON, HAN AND CHEWIE DISSOLVE INTO THE TRADE BAZAAR, ALERT BUT CONFIDENT THEIR STAY WILL PROCEED WITHOUT INCIDENT.
THEY ARE WRONG!
FOR, ELSEWHERE, A SECRET RENDEZVOUS TAKES PLACE.. ONE THAT WILL HAVE AN EFFECT ON THEIR FUTURE..
...A VERY GRAVE EFFECT!
HE'S HERE.. I SIGNALLED HIM IN MYSELF.

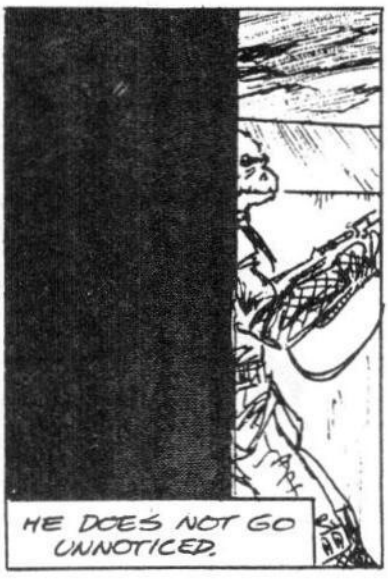
EXCCCELENT! I'VE BEEN WAITING FOR SSSOLO'S ARRIVAL QUITE EAGERLY SSSINCE I LEARNED OF YOUR AQUAINTANCCCE WITH HIM.
I...er... EXPECT TO BE PAID..
DON'T WORRY, TAHOR DUMA... YOU WILL BE REWARDED WELL FOR YOUR ASSSISSS-TANCCCE...
...FOR JABBA THE HUT ISSS OFFERING A SSSMALL FORTUNE ON SSSOLO'S HEAD...
...A FORTUNE I PLAN TO COLLECT!
BUT FIRSSST...I NEED YOU TO DO ONE MORE TASSSK...
SHORTLY...
SAY...LOOK AT THIS, CHEWIE... NEW ISSUE EMPIRE ORDERS...AN ALERT AGAINST SMUGGLERS!
SEEMS THE EMPEROR'S REALLY HACKED ABOUT LOSIN' THE DEATH STAR AN' HE'S GONNA INITIATE A MARTIAL LAW ON THE GALAXY.
LOOKS LIKE WE'RE GONNA BE REJOININ' PRINCESS LEIA'S REBELS PRETTY SOON.
BORRK?
NO, I AIN'T GOIN' SOFT. IT'S JUST THAT THOSE PEOPLE'RE GONNA NEED SOME EXPERIENCED HELP!
AN' I WOULDN'T MIND MEETIN' UP WITH THE PRINCESS AGAIN. SHE MAY BE UPPETY, BUT THE LADY HAS DEFINITE POTENTIA--.
HAN! CHEWIE!

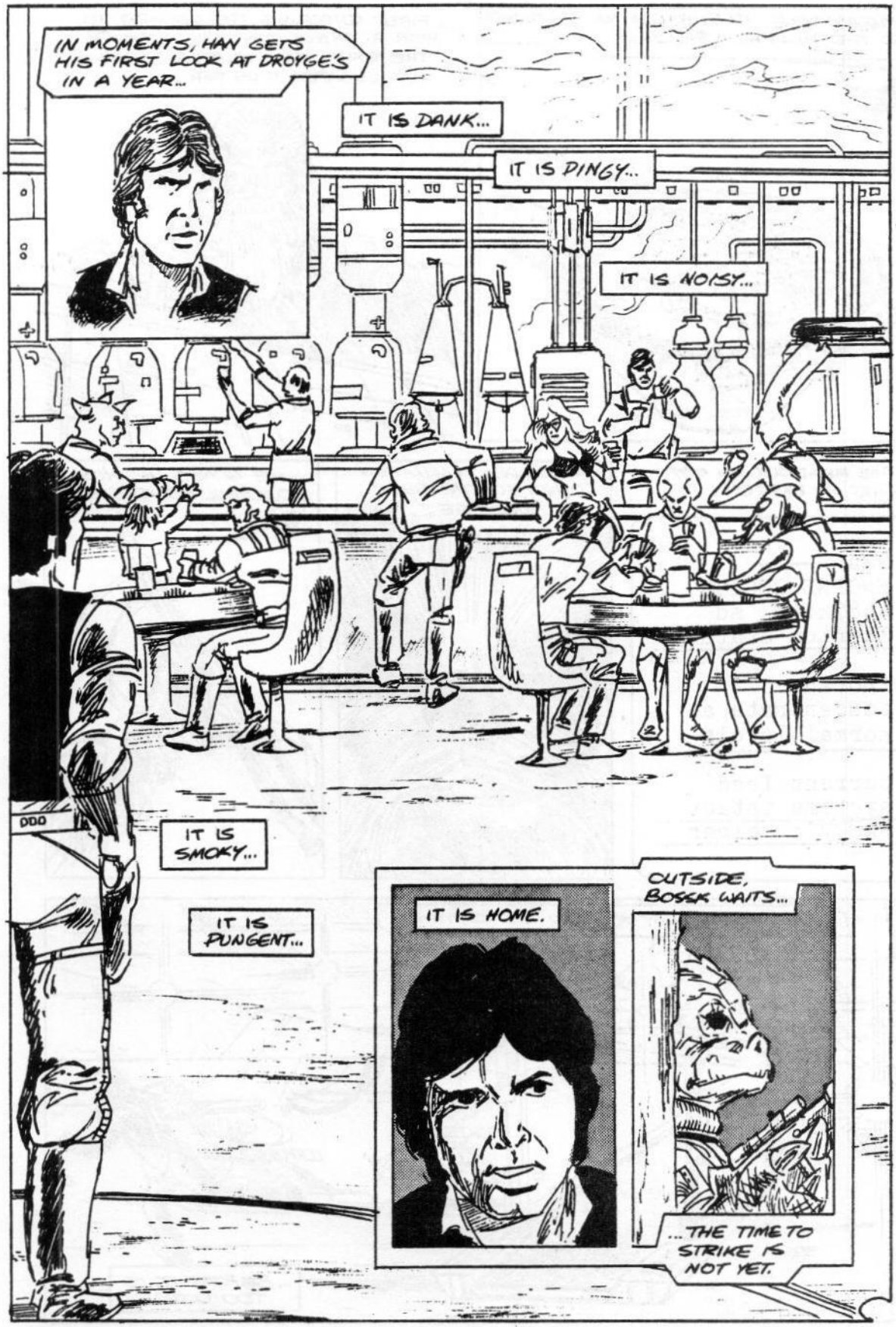
TAHOR! YA FINALLY FIND OUT HOW BORING IT IS IN LANDING CONTROL AN' DECIDE TO TAKE IN THE PLEASURE OF OUR COMPANY?
NOPE. THIS ISN'T A SOCIAL CALL.
WE JUST RAN OUR CHECK AN' DECONTAMINATION ON THE FALCON...
...SEEMS HER PORT ENGINE FEED HAS DEVELOPED A SMALL THORIUM LEAK. I THOUGHT IT BEST TO WARN YOU BEFORE THE SHIP GOES UP IN A BLAZE OF GLORY.
THORIUM'S MORE IN YOUR LEAGUE THAN MINE, CHEWIE.
WANNA SEE IF YOU CAN DO ANYTHING ABOUT IT?
WURRRG?
YEAH, GO ON AHEAD. I'LL BE ALLRIGHT. BESIDES...
...THEY DON'T ALLOW WOOKIEES IN DROYGE'S BAR, REMEMBER?
GCRRAAK!!! ARREK!!!
AFTER A THOROUGH SCOLDING, THE GIANT WOOKIEE TAKES HIS LEAVE.
WHAT WAS THAT ALL ABOUT?
A TRADITION...
SEE, EVERY YEAR WE COME HERE AN' VISIT DROYGE'S BAR. DROYGE AN' US GO WAY BACK.
BUT, LAST YEAR CHEWIE GOT STONE DRUNK AN' ALMOST TORE UP HIS WHOLE PLACE IN A WRESTLIN' MATCH WITH ANOTHER WOOKIEE...
...DROYGE WAS SO STEAMED, HE KICKED 'EM BOTH OUT AN' BARRED THE JOINT FROM WOOKIEES. NOW THAT WAS A SIGHT!


SO ANYWAY, THAT'S WHERE I'M HEADIN'.
YOU COMIN'?
CAN'T. I GOT SOME... PERSONAL BUSINESS TO TAKE CARE OF.
Oh. WELL, CLEAR SKIES!
SORRY, HAN.
TAHOR DUMA MAKES HIS WAY THROUGH THE BAZAAR... FINALLY REACHING A DARK ALLEYWAY...
...AND HIS CLIENT!
LOOK AWAY FROM ME, FOOL-- BEFORE WE'RE SSSPOTTED TALKING!
I LIED TO THEM ABOUT SOME DAMAGE TO THEIR SHIP...THE WOOKIEE'S GONE BACK. SOLO'S ON HIS WAY TO DROYGE'S BAR. WOOKIEES ARE BARRED FROM THERE.
WELL DONE. YOUR SSSERVICCCE ISSS NOW ENDED. YOUR PAYMENT AWAITSSS YOU AT THE ALLEY'SSS END.
TH-THANK YOU.
YAAGHH!
FRATOW!
YOU'RE WELCOME-!

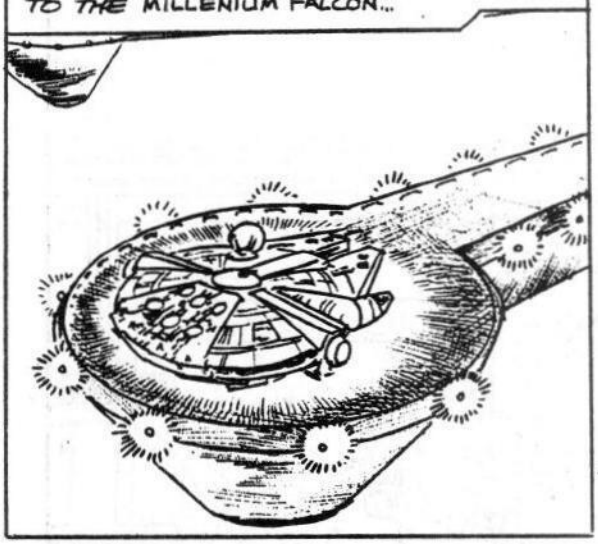

I COULD NOT ALLOW YOU TO LIVE, TAHOR DUMA...
..YOU WERE BEGINNING TO CRACK. NO DOUBT YOU WOULD HAVE GONE STRAIGHT BACK TO SSSOLO AND WARNED HIM OF MY PRESSSENCCCE...
...AND NO MAN BETRAYSSS BOSSK AND LIVESSS!

AS DUSK BEGINS TO SLOWLY DRAW ITSELF OVER MOLGAR, THE NIGHT LIFE COMMENCES.. AND A MULTITUDE OF SPACERS MIGRATES TO DROYGE'S BAR...
DROYGE
...HAN SOLO AMONG THEM.


HE DOES NOT GO UNNOTICED.


IN MOMENTS, HAN GETS HIS FIRST LOOK AT DROYGE'S IN A YEAR...
IT IS DANK...
IT IS DINGY...
IT IS NOISY...
IT IS SMOKY...
IT IS PUNGENT...
IT IS HOME.
OUTSIDE, BOSSK WAITS...
...THE TIME TO STRIKE IS NOT YET.

MEANWHILE, CHEWBACCA HAS RETURNED TO THE MILLENIUM FALCON...



...FIRST ENTERING THE COCKPIT TO RUN A CHECK ON HOW MUCH OF THE EXTREMELY VOLATILE THORIUM HAS ESCAPED THUS FAR...

...THE READOUT IS NOT WHAT HE EXPECTS!

SCAN — —
ENGINE REGION
4487k:NN sd
Thorium status ..

thorium
concentrate at
normal levels ..

current feed
systems intact ..
SAFETY: clear

A SUDDEN REALIZATION COMES TO THE GIANT WOOKIEE...

...HE GRABS UP HIS POWERFUL BOWCASTER...

...AND RACES AWAY TO FIND HIS CAPTAIN...

...BEFORE IT IS TOO LATE!!

LATER, AS CHEWIE SEARCHES..
...SO ANYWAY, JABBA TELLS ME WE MISSED AN OUTPOST WAY BACK AT THE BEGINNING OF THE KESSEL RUN...
BOSSK IS THROUGH WAITING...
...IT IS TIME!
TROUBLE.
SSSOLO...
...I AM A BOUNTY HUNTER... AND I WANT YOU!!

SORRY, YOU'RE NOT MY TYPE.
HAHAHAHA
...SO ANYWAY, I SAID TO JABBA--
DO NOT MOCK ME, SSSMUGGLER...
IT ISSS MOSSST UNWISSCE!
AH, ONE SECOND, SWEETHEART.
HEY, BEAT IT, POPS! CAN'T YA SEE I'M ENTERTAINING A GUEST? I DON'T HAVE TIME TO HAVE AT IT WITH ANOTHER TWO-BIT BOUNTY HUNTER LOOKIN' A MARK!
CURB YOUR TONGUE, SSSOLO, I WARN YOU...
FIND SOMEONE IN YOUR OWN LEAGUE... AN' COME BACK WHEN YOU'VE PASSED AMATUER, CKA--
SHUNGG!
UNH!

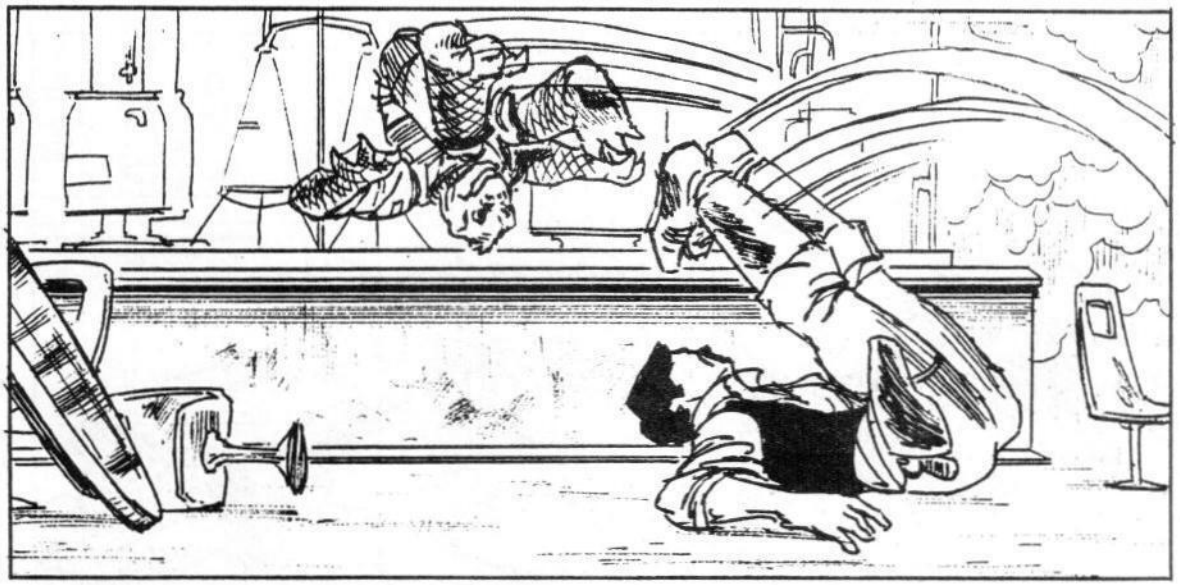
DUMB, SSSOLO... NEVER TURN YOUR BACK ON AN UNKNOWN ENEMY...
...ESSSPECIALLY WHEN THE ENEMY ISSS... BOSSK!
PAL, YOU JUST STARTED SOMETHIN'...
...YOU'RE GONNA WISH YOU HADN'T!!
FASTER THAN THE EYE CAN FOLLOW, HAN'S BLASTER IS CLEAR OF ITS HOLSTER AND SPEWING LASER FIRE...
...BUT TO NO AVAIL!!
SHOOM!
SSSURPRISSSED, SSSOLO?
LIFE ON MY HIGH-G HOMEWORLD ISSS HARSH... OUR SSSKINS MUSST BE THICK ENOUGH TO RESISSST THE ENVIRONMENTAL CONDITIONSSS...
...BLASSSTER FIRE BUT TICKLES ME!
SSSADLY, I'M AFRAID I CANNOT SSSAY THE SSSAME FOR YOU!
FRATOW!

GUIDED MORE BY INSTINCT THAN SKILL, HAN EVADES THE BLAST...
... THE JUKE 'DROID BEHIND HIM IS NOT SO LUCKY!
IT BLOWS...
... AND THE BAR IS QUICKLY DEVOID OF PATRONS!
... ALL BUT TWO!
VERY RESSSOUR-CCCEFUL, SSSOLO... BUT I DON'T NEED WEAPONSSS TO DEAL WITH YOU...
...SSSO!
WHOM!!
GOTTA... KEEP HIM OCCUPIED... I CAN'T HURT 'IM... BUT MAYBE I CAN KEEP 'IM OFF BALANCE-!
PTOW
FTAK

LONG ENOUGH TO DO...
BOK!
...THIS!!
EEEEEYYYOWW!!
IT APPEARSSE I'VE OVER-ESSSTIMATED YOU, SSSOLO... EVEN A CHILD WOULD KNOW BETTER THAN TO SSSTRIKE ONE WHOSSSE SSSKIN IS TOUGH ENOUGH TO RESSSISSST BLASSSTER FIRE!
AND NOW, IF THISSS FOOLISHNESSS ISSS OVER...
WAKK!

THAKKK!!
WOK!
KA-POW!!

Ooooohhh...
YOU WERE WARNED, SSSOLO... BUT YOU DIDN'T LISSSTEN...
BE THANKFUL JABBA'S BOUNTY ON YOU IS DOUBLED IF YOU ARE DELIVERED TO HIM ALIVE..
...BECAUSSSE IF IT WEREN'T, I WOULD EXPRESSS NO REMORSSSE AT KILLING YOU HERE AND NOW...
...ASSS I DID WITH YOUR FRIEND, TAHOR DUMA!
T-TAHOR?
YOU KILLED TAHOR??



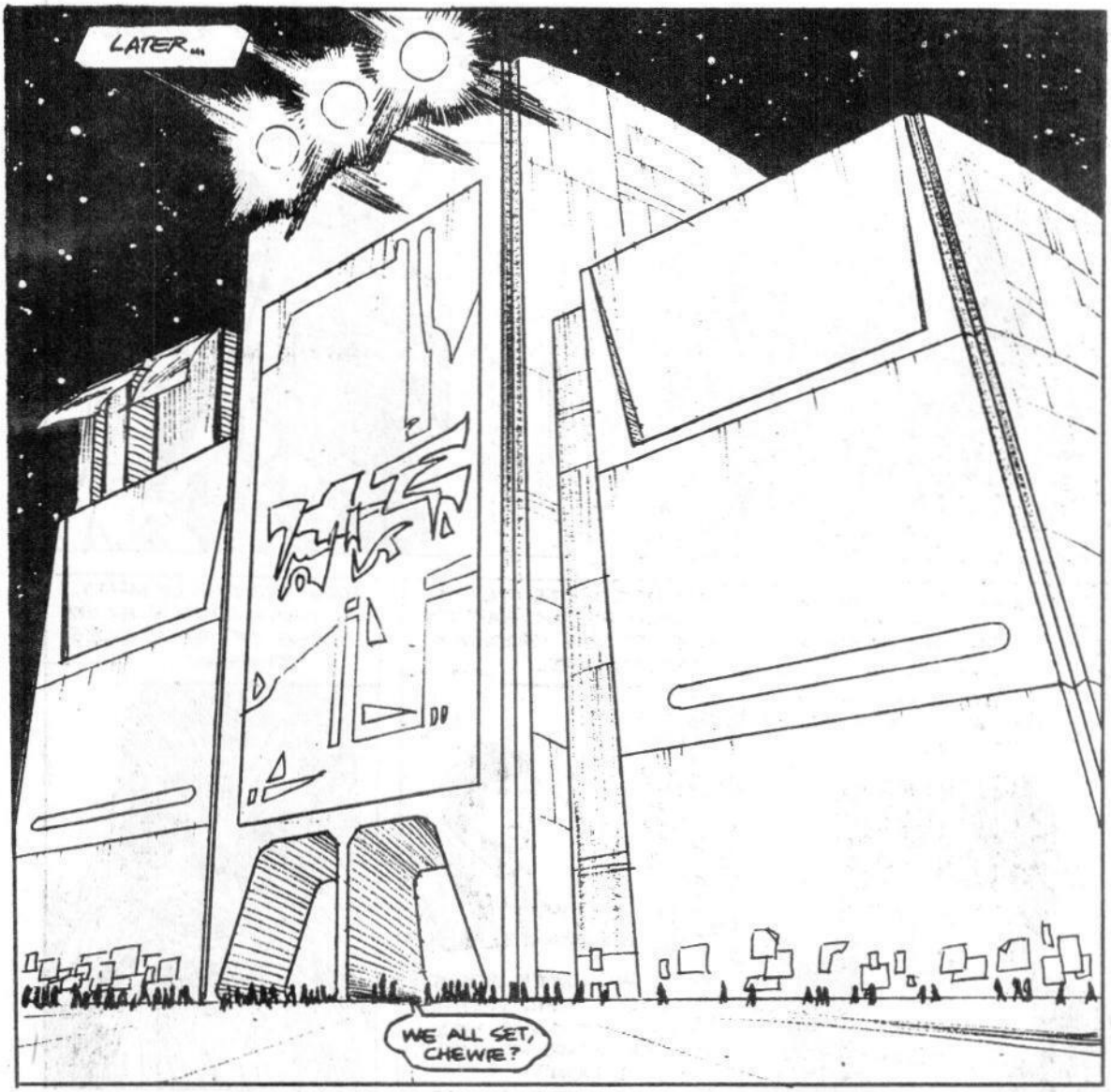
SKA-RASHH

YAAAAGKK! THE LIQUOR-- BURNING ME! CAN'T-- SSSEE!
THAT'S IT...
...MY TICKET OUTTA HERE! BET THIS'S THE FIRST TIME LICQUOR'S GOTTEN ME OUT 'A TROUBLE!
EAT THIS, BOUNTY HUNTER!
YAAAAARRGGK!!
BUKSH
YGGKK! SSSOLO!!
≷WHEW!≷ IF THERE WAS EVER A BET-TER TIME TO RUN...
YEAH--GET OUT'A HERE, SOLO! I KNEW IT--YOU AN' THAT WOOKIEE ARE NOTHIN' BUT TROUBLE! AN' DON'T BOTHER COMIN' BACK NEXT YEAR!!
SORRY, DROYGE... BUT I KNOW YOU DON'T REALLY MEAN IT-!
NOW LET'S GET BACK TO THE FALCON!

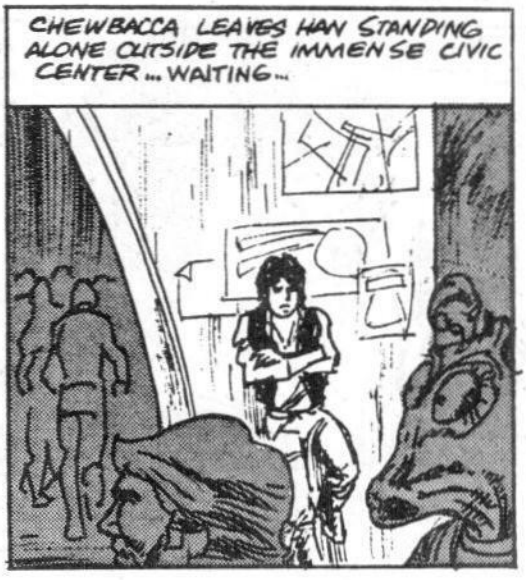
BUT HAN NEVER QUITE MAKES IT BACK TO HIS BELOVED SHIP...
... FOR EVERY TIME HE IS IN SIGHT OF THE LANDING PORT, BOSSK IS THERE!
... EVERY ATTEMPT HE MAKES TO REACH THE FALCON IS BLOCKED BY THE DEADLY BOUNTY HUNTER!

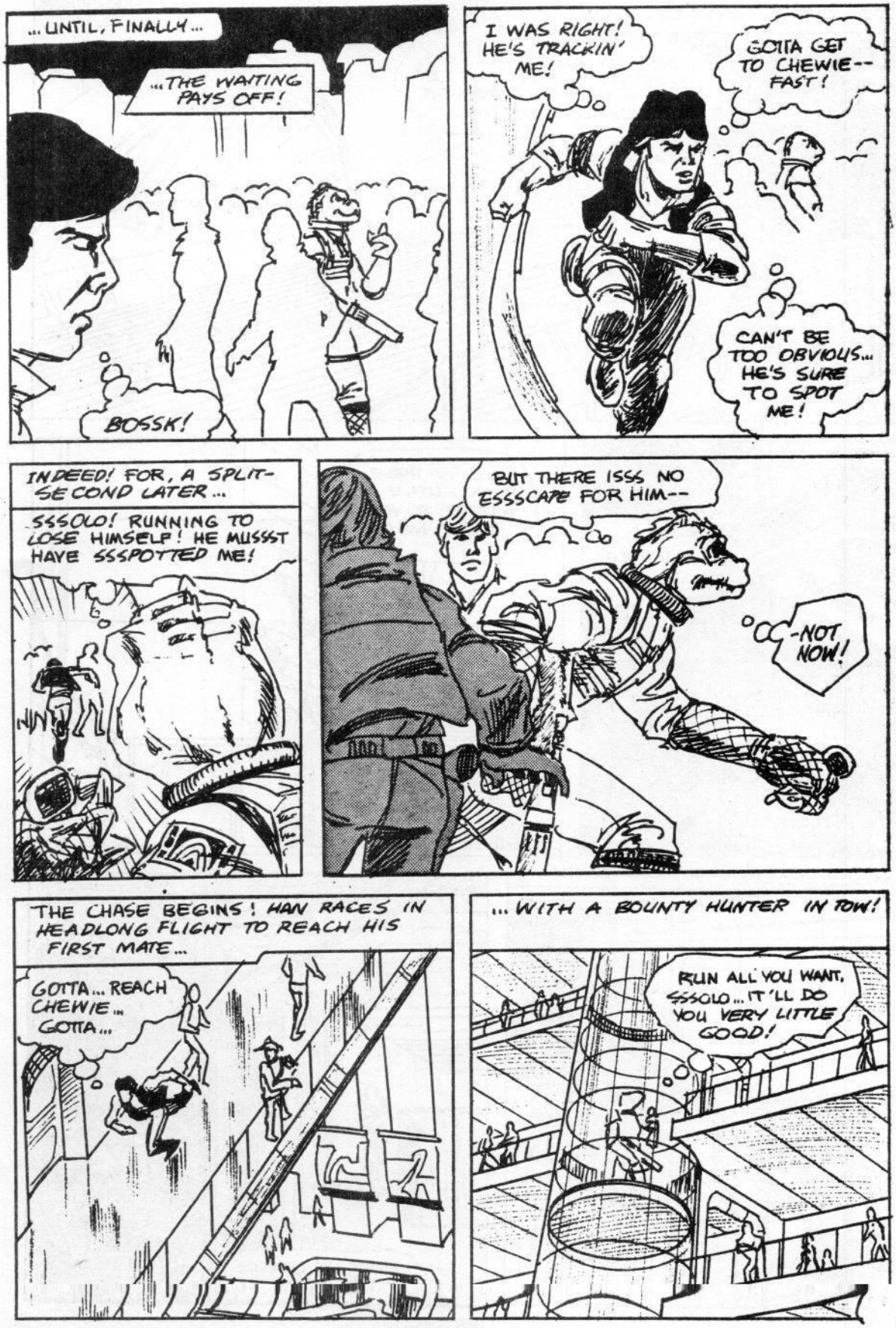
AND, AS HAN FLEES BOSSK'S LATEST BLOCKADE...
WHAT'S GOIN' ON? HOW DOES THAT GREEN GARGOYLE BEAT ME TO EVERY STOP? HE'S GOTTA BE TRACKIN' ME SOMEH--
ABRUPTLY...
WHA--

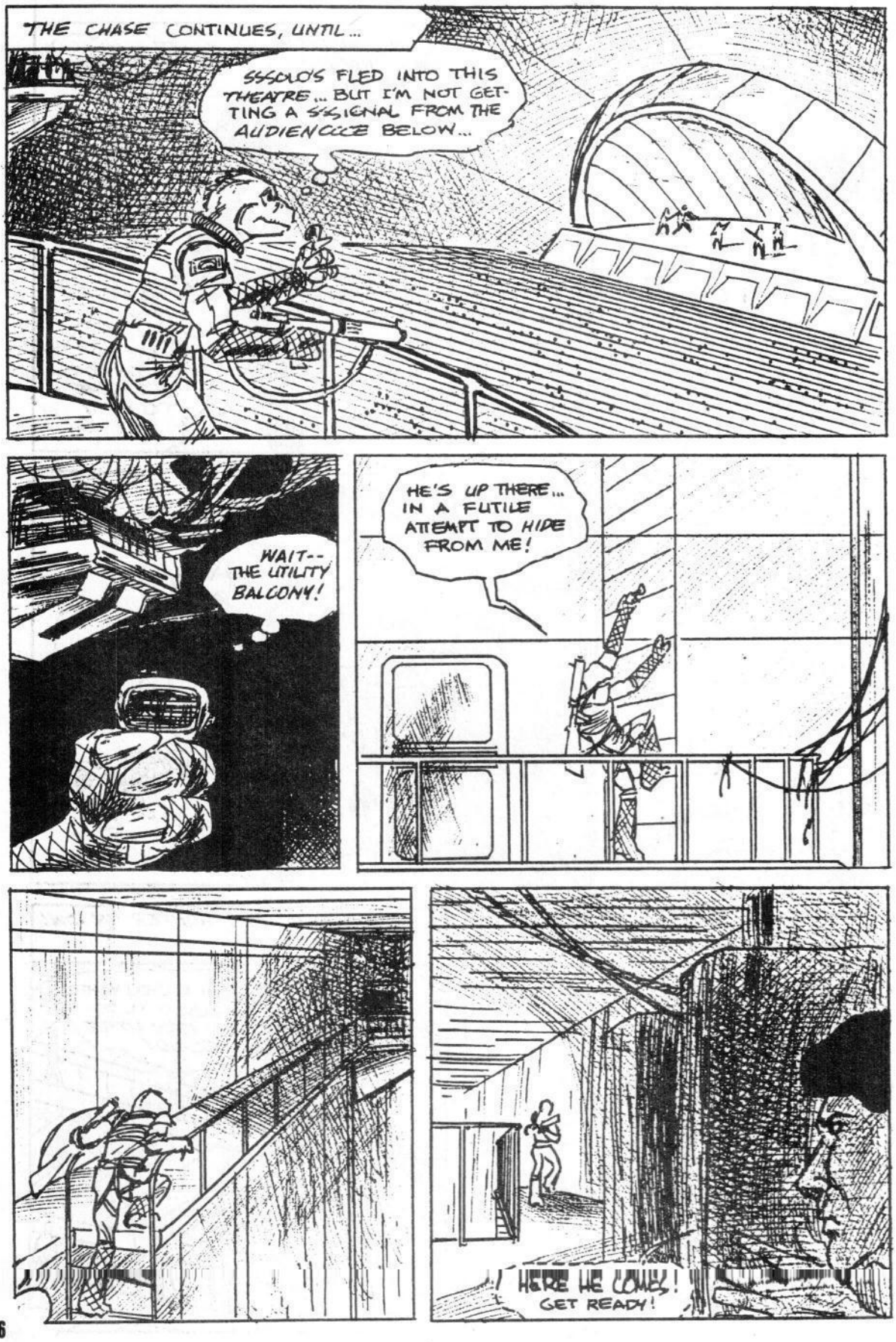
GRAUURK!
CHEWIE!
BOY, AM I GLAD TO SEE YOU, BIG BUDDY!
BAWRKK, GRAUAK!!
THE DAMAGE TO THE FALCON'S THORIUM FEED IS NIL? THEN TAHOA SUCKERED US!
BUT HE GOT WHAT HE DESERVED! LISTEN TO THIS!
HAN RECOUNTS THE PAST COUPLE HOURS' HAPPENINGS TO HIS WOOKIEE FIRST MATE...
--AN' THIS CREEP, BOSSK'S BEEN FOLLOWIN' ME EVER SINCE! I FIGURE HE'S TRACKIN' ME SOMEHOW, BUT I DON'T--
HAN SUDDENLY HALTS... AS CHEWBACCA'S ACUTE SENSE OF SMELL GOES TO WORK...
THEN...
BORRK-RAAAK!
SON OF A GUNDARK! HE MUST'A PLANTED IT ON ME DURING OUR FIGHT AT DROYGE'S!
HE'S BEEN TRACKIN' ME WITH IT EVER SINCE!
LISTEN, PAL, DO YOU REMEMBER THE NAME OF THAT ENTERTAINMENT CENTER WE VISITED LAST YEAR?
WRRK?
I JUST GOT ME AN' INNOVATION!


LATER...
WE ALL SET, CHEWIE?

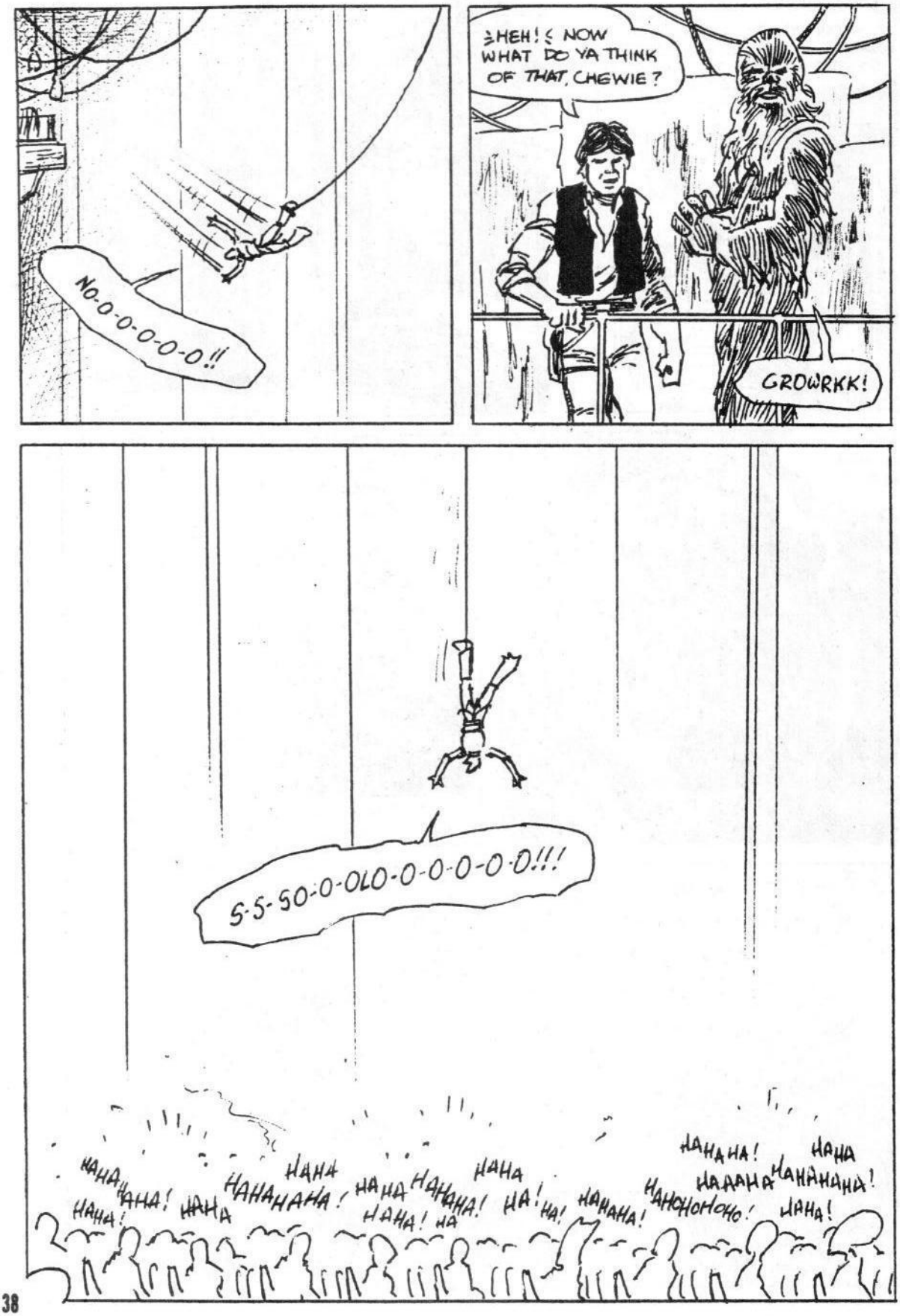
BRAKK!
GREAT. GO GET INTO POSITION!
WARRK! GRAWWG!
I KNOW, I KNOW... I'M SORRY ABOUT YOUR NATURAL WOOKIEE REPULSION OF ANYTHING REPTILIAN... JUST TRY TO CAN IT UNTIL WE'RE READY.


CHEWBACCA LEAVES HAN STANDING ALONE OUTSIDE THE IMMENSE CIVIC CENTER... WAITING...

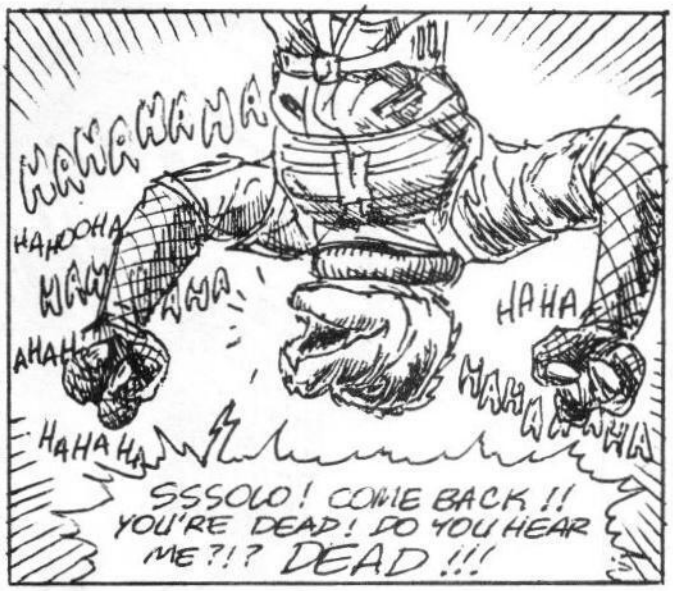

...UNTIL, FINALLY...
...THE WAITING PAYS OFF!
BOSSK!
I WAS RIGHT! HE'S TRACKIN' ME!
GOTTA GET TO CHEWIE-- FAST!
CAN'T BE TOO OBVIOUS... HE'S SURE TO SPOT ME!
INDEED! FOR, A SPLIT-SECOND LATER...
SSSOLO! RUNNING TO LOSE HIMSELF! HE MUSSST HAVE SSSPOTTED ME!
BUT THERE ISSS NO ESSSCAPE FOR HIM--
-NOT NOW!
THE CHASE BEGINS! HAN RACES IN HEADLONG FLIGHT TO REACH HIS FIRST MATE...
GOTTA... REACH CHEWIE... GOTTA...
...WITH A BOUNTY HUNTER IN TOW!
RUN ALL YOU WANT, SSSOLO... IT'LL DO YOU VERY LITTLE GOOD!

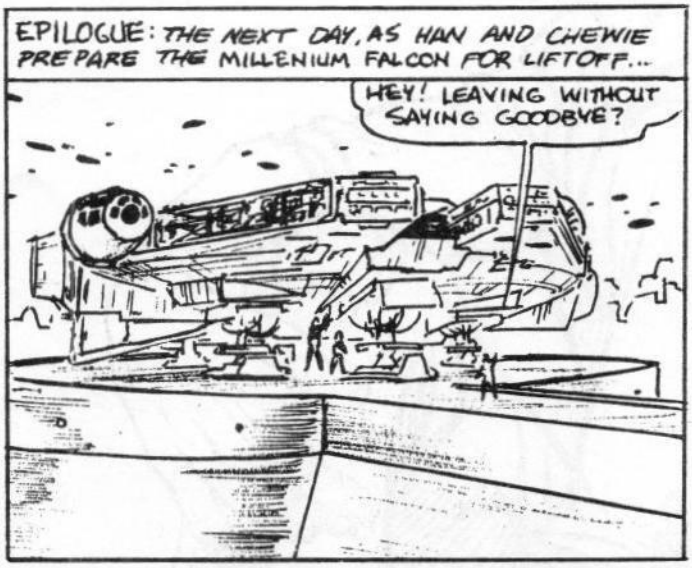

THE CHASE CONTINUES, UNTIL...
SSSOLO'S FLED INTO THIS THEATRE... BUT I'M NOT GETTING A SSSIGNAL FROM THE AUDIENCCCE BELOW...
WAIT-- THE UTILITY BALCONY!
HE'S UP THERE... IN A FUTILE ATTEMPT TO HIDE FROM ME!
HERE HE COMES! GET READY!

I KNOW YOU'RE HIDING UP HERE, SSSOLO ... GIVE YOURSSSELF UP AND I'LL MAKE IT PAINLESSS!
I'LL BET!
LASSST CHANCCCE, SSSOLO!
NOW, CHEWIE!
HAN'S FINGER STABS A FLOODLIGHT, STAGGERING BOSSK BACK...
... INTO CHEWBACCA!
ARRAGHH!
WHOM!
YUNFF!

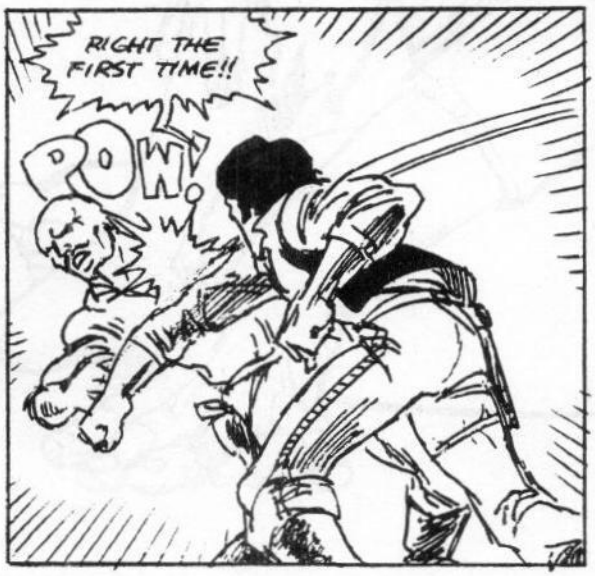

NO-O-O-O-O-O!!
≥HEH!≤ NOW WHAT DO YA THINK OF THAT, CHEWIE?
GROWRKK!
S-S-SO-O-OLO-O-O-O-O-O!!!
HANA
HANAHANA!
HANAHANAHANA!
HANAHANAHANA!
HANAHONOHO!
HANAHANA!

LET'S GO, CHEWIE... I GUESS WE'RE FINISHED HERE.


HAHAHAHA
HAHOOHA
WAH
AHAH
AHA
HAHA
HAHAHA
HAHAHAHA
SSSOLO! COME BACK!! YOU'RE DEAD! DO YOU HEAR ME?!? DEAD!!!


EPILOGUE: THE NEXT DAY, AS HAN AND CHEWIE PREPARE THE MILLENIUM FALCON FOR LIFTOFF...
HEY! LEAVING WITHOUT SAYING GOODBYE?

TAHOR! BUT--
"I'M SUPPOSED TO BE DEAD?" NOT QUITE. Y'SEE BOSSK DIDN'T KNOW IT, BUT HIS BLASTER WAS SET ON "STUN" INSTEAD'A "KILL." YESTERDAY JUST WASN'T HIS DAY!
Uh... HE WAS PAYIN' ME TO SPY ON YA... BUT, WELL... I GUESS YOU ALREADY FIGURED THAT OUT--


RIGHT THE FIRST TIME!!
POW!

SEE YA NEXT YEAR!
FIN

Little One

Little one with the sad eyes
cut on your finger, dust on your clothes --
you've been fighting again. I know it's hard
to keep your hands to yourself
when the hurting words start to fly:
bastard, by-blow, space whore's brat.
I know what they say, those wagging tongues,
young and old, that won't keep still.
It's not your fault, my sad-eyed son,
that you were born to this life --
living on the edge of the streets,
your mother reduced to trading her body
for a few credits and sometimes a blow,
your father a spacer you never knew.
If fate had been a little kinder
it might well have been different ....
Ah, well. Come here to me, little one,
and let me take the sadness from your eyes.
Sit here beside me and watch the stars.
I remember your tiny fist, when you were a babe,
reaching for them, grabbing, questing.
Sleep now, little one, and dream sweet dreams
of a steel and silver bird that floats in the air,
that takes you to bright worlds of promise
and flickers by radiant stars of hope.
Dream, and I shall dream with you,
and pray that the gods be kind to you.
Sleep peacefully, little one with the sad eyes,
and know that I love you.

Kelly Hill

CERULLEAN DAWN

MARTIE BENEDICT

illustrated by Wanda Lybarger

Han Solo had occasionally wondered what, given a threatening situation, a man's priorities might dictate he go for first -- his pants or his gun. Finding himself in just such a situation, and speculation being something less than academic, he quickly discovered where his personal priorities lay when a man's voice roared up the stairs. "Yolet! I'm coming up, and you better be alone!"

Han swung a leg out of bed thinking, pants...pants, and whispering furiously, "Damn! Yolet, you told me Chardis was DEAD!"

"I was speaking metaphorically," the slim brunette replied, snaking across the covers to hand him things.

"Grieving widow...!"

"Well, if you were married to that idiot, you'd grieve too."

"Yolet!" Chardis growled from the head of the stairs.

Solo had managed to hustle into those important pants and pull on his boots. He grabbed his shirt and vest and slung his gunbelt over his left shoulder. "I'll look you up later," he said, and, defying the approaching tread of doom coming down the hall, pulled Yolet close for a brief but thorough kiss. Then he was out the window and sliding along the ledge just as Chardis burst through the bedroom door.

"I caught you this time, Yolet!"

"Caught me at what, you goon? I'm all alone!"

"Someone was here. It was Solo, wasn't it? Wasn't it?"

"Chardis! Why Solo!"

"Because, damn you, you're smiling!"

Han left them still trading shots and concentrated on getting down and out.

Beating it out the window, he hadn't forgotten he was on the second story. He had, however, overlooked the moat. Gleaming evilly in the moonlight, brackish and forbidding, it lay directly beneath him, it's scum-filmed surface disturbed by ominous lumps. Han had a good idea they were blurds. It would be just like that tank-brained Chardis to load his moat with carnivorous blurds. He hoped fervantly that Yolet would quit smiling and give him some lead time. He had no desire to shoot Chardis, and all he wanted at this point was away.

He came to a halt at the building's corner. Here the ledge gave out. It was a choice of going up, down or back, and none of them appealed to him.

From somewhere below, Solo heard slamming doors and angry voices, and he got the unpleasant feeling that Yolet had not been able to convince Chardis of her innocence and that he was heading out to beat the bushes, probably with his guard swifts. Probably with a gun.

Han took a second to shrug into the rest of his clothing and belt his blaster around his hips, making fast the tie-down just above his right knee. He felt a bit better, but no more inspired.

The best he could come up with involved a tree on the far side of the moat. It wasn't much, but it was down, and it beat ducking back inside where he could hear the bustle of Chardis' retainers turning out the upstairs.

Han whipped the high tension line loop from his belt and quickly fitted a small grappling claw to the line's end. Keeping an eye on the ground, and his balance as best he could, he whirled the line experimentally then cast it into the shadowed, leafy mass opposite. The claw caught something and held against his efforts to dislodge it, though what it had snagged Solo couldn't tell and for all he knew, it would give way under his full weight, providing the blurds with a late snack.

But he could see a bulky shadow approaching from the right, alongside the moat, flanked by two smaller streamlined shadows that could only be Chardis and his swifts, and he found it hard to imagine a position more worthy of a target than the one he was occupying now.

The swifts coursed ahead of Chardis. Solo could begin to make out their luminous eyes and fangs and hear their eager panting. He felt overly menaced with teeth.

Lybarger '81

As he was debating whether to go now or let them pass below him, he was startled by a theatrically loud aside from the direction of Yolet's bedroom window. "Han, darling!" she projected, dripping tremulo, "don't go out there! He'll kill you!"

From the Chardis-shadow came a grunt of anger. It turned and charged back toward the lower door, whistling up the swifts.

Han had a moment to marvel at the man's awesome gullability, then he tightened his grip on the line, hoped that it would hold, that it would draw him up short -- a hundred other things -- and jumped.

At the parigee of his arc, Han hit the moat. With a dismal shock he felt his boots plunge into the unappetizing water, shipping a good bit of it and picking up a few over-eager blurds in the process. The turgid moat cut his momentum as effectively as a stone wall. There was nothing for it but to go up the line. Dripping, dangling busily munching blurds, Han went hand-over aslant the moat's stone curb and managed to haul himself over onto the grass.

But the splash had attracted Chardis -- between them he and Yolet were keeping him on the run, Han reflected wryly -- and it didn't look like breezing out into the dark anymore.

Chardis loosed the swifts with a gutteral command that sound depressingly like "Kill!"

Solo was up in a second. He tore the tenacious blurds from their preoccupation with devouring his spaceman's boots and began to fling them at the coursing swifts. He didn't know what a blurd's survival time out of water was, but from the howls of the swifts, it appeared that they could hold their breath for a while and still not lose their appetite. That left Chardis.

A projectile whistled past Solo's shoulder tearing out a chunk of tree behind him. On instinct Han drew and returned fire. It pained him that this was necessary, for he was still thinking down and out, but Chardis was taking the matter much more seriously than Solo thought was warranted.

He made a decision. Holstering his blaster, Han dropped into the shadows and charged. He took the big man low, coming up with a forearm slam and a knee at the same time. Chardis let out a deflated sound. His projectile weapon exploded next to Han's ear, making his head ring alarmingly.

The element of surprise with him, Han managed to get in another crack to Chardis' jaw before the big man could retaliate. Slow and ponderous, Chardis fought back. He brought the projectile gun around catching Solo a glancing blow.

"Solo! You no-good..." he fumbled for a metaphore suitably obscene.

Not in a mood to parlay, Han grabbed his opponent's gun hand, forcing it out, working the wrist back, and at the same time bringing his elbow around into Chardis' solar plexus. But Chardis was obstinate. Refusing to go down, he threw his free arm around Solo's neck wrenching him off balance and effectively shutting off his breath.

Out of the corner of his eye Han saw Yolet collaring the fidgeting swifts and had a passing wish that she would do him another favor and cosh her old man. But at that moment Chardis used a clumsy leg trip and they both went down in a tangle.

Chardis had the weight advantage and it began to look to Solo as though his decision had been a terrible mistake, when he felt a stinging pain low on his left leg. His boot, still full of moat water, harbored a single blurd whose appetite had apparently just cut in.

Dizzy from Chardis' relentless stranglehold, Han had just the presence of mind to pull off his boot and scrabble inside the slick, swampy interior until something fastened painfully onto his hand. Concentrating in the twilight of consciousness upon his grip on Chardis' wrist, he withdrew the blurd and transferred it to the big man's face.

Immediately the hold on his throat loosened. Chardis bellowed, rolling away, tearing at the ravenous little beast.

Gasping, Solo struggled to his feet, as his sight returned. Chardis was up and running for the house, blood streaming from the wicked teeth wounds.

"This way, Han," Yolet whispered. Beside him, taking his arm with one hand and reigning the swifts with the other, she pulled him along through the trees.

"It got a little out of hand, hey?" he said, jogging along beside her.

"Ah, but it was worth it -- for me, at least. Of course I didn't land in the moat..."

They had reached the postern gate. Bevond it lay a thoroughfare. They could hear the sounds, the busy, bright noise of traffic channels, the racing pulse of a spaceport city. And although that was his millieu, his egress to the stars, for a moment Han wished he might linger in the dark and secret garden with the enchanting chatelaine of the manse.

"Yolet," he said earnestly, "it was worth every blurd bite. Another time, maybe?"

"Any time."

"You're on." He kissed her once more, then passed out into the city lights.

* * *

Boarding the *Millennium Falcon* in her circular docking bay, Han heard the commo board buzzing insistently for attention.

Chewie was nowhere to be seen, probably, thought Han, he was still out playing Bastinados and Basilisks, a fantastical game of probabilities and extrapolation which the 7-foot Wookiee favored over more prosaic diversions. Finding a suitable B and B partner was in itself a time-consuming activity, not to mention that fact that a lively round of the game could go on for days. Han hoped Chewie would hurry it up. The blurd bite wouldn't keep Chardis incapacitated for long, and Han thought to be well away by the time that irate husband had tracked him down.

The message on the board was a directed communique which meant that someone knew where he was, a thought which Han did not relish. It contained an intention to charter, however, which looked a lot better. Voice-signed by Narodian Wolfit who identified himself as head of something called a Spectral Impact Team, the message requested Captain Solo rendezvous with the Team on Blayk's Planet, homeworld of the Jaban Academicians, universally renown for their scholastic achievements.

Han looked as though he'd just bit into something unpleasant at the thought of hauling a group of border-logic scholars around, yet he could not deny that needed a charter and the sooner the better. He had the option of turning it down of course, but an echo of Chardis' rage-filled voice, searching for some unspeakable invective was dancing around in his head, making the rendezvous with t he professors begin to look very good indeed.

Han had finished attending to his scrapes, blurd-bites, and general clean-up, and was on the point of going out in search of Chewie when he heard a heavy tread on the *Falcon's* boarding ramp and some gutteral grumbling that had a Wookiee-like flavor to it.

Han shot the hatch manually. "What's the matter, Fuzz-ball? Forget your key?" he was about to say when he identified the object at the open hatchway -- a military issue lase-thrower. Behind it stood a very annoyed Chardis and two ugly henchmen.

Han swallowed hard. "Uh, Chardis, hey..." he began, hands automatically going palm out. He found it difficult to think of things to say with the lase-thrower pointed at his middle.

But Chardis leapt into the conversational gap. "I'm gonna kill you, Solo. This time you die, really die. I'm gonna wipe that dumb look off your face for good! Got that?"

"Uh, look, Chardis, we really ought to talk this over..."

"No more talk."

Solo tensed for a final move. He thought he could maybe hook his blaster and shy left before Chardis fired the laser but there were the other two as well...

He was about to go for it, when a familiar patch of russet fur appeared behind the third man on the ramp. Like the deft-footed hunter he was Chewie had stalked the intruders. Now he roared like thunder and cracked the startled henchmen together, then slammed them head-up into the underside of the *Falcon's* hull.

All of the spring-tight muscle tension Solo had built for his quickdraw, he suddenly threw into a drop and lunge for Chardis' feet. The lase-thrower exploded, blowing a super-hot stream of destruction over his head and into the corridor wall.

Off balance, Chardis flailed wildly, falling backward into Chewie's ferocious embrace.

Han was up in a split second, wrenching the lase-thrower from his hands and hurling it clattering down the corridor. His fists were clenched, teeth bared in a moment of rare savagery. He wanted nothing so much as to smash Chardis' face until bone splinted and blood flowed, but the big menace was completely helpless in Chewbacca's iron grip.

Han shook his head, hands dropping. "Nah, Chardis. Not me, not this time." The big man's eyes were wary. "Chewie," Han continued, "help me truss these tough guys up, then get ready to raise ship. We're heading out tonight."

The wary look in Chardis' eyes became luminous with fear. "Solo! You're not going to space me, are you?"

"Who, me?" Han asked innocently. "Why would you think that?" He grinned wickedly. "I'm just gonna give you a ride home!"

The *Millennium Falcon* cruised at a hair over hover speed just above tree level. The stately pile of masonry that was Chardis' manse jutted out of a sea of leaves directly ahead.

"I'll give you a call, partner," Han said, motioning Chewie, who dragged the bound Chardis and his two retainers back to the cargo drop hatch.

When the *Falcon* reached the lawn surrounding the moat, Han opened the hailing speaker. "Yolet? I've got a little present for you."

A light came on in the familiar bedroom. A woman's silhouette appeared in the window. Han couldn't hear her, but he saw her jaunty wave.

"Another time!" he called and flashed the running lights once. Then he yelled, "Cut 'em loose!"

One by one, Chewbacca cut the restraining straps and pushed each man out the cargo drop hatch. Solo heard three very satisfying splashes and a lot of howling as the *Falcon* rose into the dawning sky. It had been an interesting night.

* * *

The Masters' Hall at the School Pre-eminate on Blayk's Planet was an imposing building, grandly constructed of flying arches and tall windows with hundreds of lights. Full of richly gowned savants and smoothly unobstrusive mechanicals, it was the sort of place that made Solo wish he traveled in a little more style. Rugged good looks and his respect-inspiring gunman's outfit never completely disguised the fact that he was, and probably always would be, a freighter bum.

As was his habit when feeling ill-at-ease, he was humming very softly to himself. Much to Chewie's amusement it was an off-color dittie that began, "There's nothin' better to shorten your life than foolin' around with another man's wife." Chewie pointed this out to his captain and suffered one of Han Solo's more withering expressions.

They had been waiting for a short time when Chewie noticed two persons moving purposefully toward them. He growled to Solo, who turned and stared.

Narodian Wolfit would be the man in the lead. Somewhere close to Han's age and height, he was slimmer, pale, and dark of hair and eyes. He was possessed of an intense, dedicated look which Han found reasonable among Honor Scouts and Probity Acolytes, but rather impractical for daily use. He wore a dark nondescript robe.

The other was a woman. By far the more diverting of the two, she was a Nafressa of indeterminate age. Humanoid, but decidedly non-human, she was tall and graceful, modestly gowned in gray with a lovely, if disturbingly different face.

The intense young man offered a firm grip of greeting to the two spacemen. "Captain Solo, First Mate Chewbacca. I am Narodian Wolfit, this is my assistant, T-Rees of Nafressa."

There were murmured greetings. The tall woman stood behind and to one side of Wolfit, watching Han. "Are you this Spectral Impact Team?" he asked.

"We are two-thirds of it. There is one other member of our team...however, I would prefer to introduce him after we're aboard your ship, Captain."

"Hold it. Hold everything," Han said firmly. "This is going a little fast for me. First I haven't accepted your charter. We haven't even talked money. And I want to know what's going on. I don't charter out blind. So just start slow and give me your story."

"Sorry, very sorry, Captain Solo," Wolfit said earnestly. "You're right of course. I've been so abrupt because we are very eager to begin our mission, but as to financial arrangements..." Here is where he blows it, thought Han. "...I am willing to offer you the sum of 25,000 credits on acceptance of the charter, with an additional 75,000 credits at the conclusion of the agreement. Do you accept?"

Through the resounding echo that the mention of staggering sums of cash always set ringing in Han Solo's brain, he heard Chewbacca let out a Wookiee oath so obscure that even he had never head it before.

Dazzled and charmed, Han said, "The *Falcon* is at your disposal."

* * *

The *Millennium Falcon* reposed in one of the classier facilities Solo had ever seen. In keeping with the tone of the entire planet, the spaceport was sleek and clean, impressively outfitted with smoothly functioning hardware.

In a University supplied ground car, the party plunged down a steep ramp into the vast underground docking area. They moved swiftly through a well-lit labyrinth of tunnels, the robo-mechanism guiding them expertly to a blast door identical to many others along the circuitous route. The door irised without hesitation, giving onto a spotless formex docking bay which was an elegant temporary home for the business-like starship.

She was strictly a no-frills craft, built (and illegally altered) for defense and secrecy; and she was well perhaps the fastest smuggling ship in space.

Solo was expecting the usual attitude of dismay occasioned by his ship's less-than-luxurious appearance, but he noticed that Wolfit had a sanguine look, and the Nefressa, T-Rees, was cool and quiet. Ready to defend his ship, he was somewhat surprised at their nonchalance.

There was little to stow away. T-Rees carried a fabric satchel and Wolfit was in possession of a carrying case which he insisted on taking aboard himself.

"Now, Captain Solo, have you a central area where we may gather and discuss our mission?"

"This way," Han replied, leading them to the main cargo compartment with a loose confident stride of a man who spends his life among the stars.

T-Rees followed him with her eyes before a touch from Wolfit startled her into motion. "What is it?" he murmured.

"I'm not sure. He overwhelms me. The power is there..."

Han leaned against the main computer bank, arms folded. The others took the acceleration couch. "Okay. Let's get into it, Wolfit. Where are we going?"

"Captain, I'll be straightforward with you. We are going to find the Cerullean Dawn."

Han couldn't help himself. He burst out laughing. Chewie joined with a honk of mirth. "You've got to be kidding! The Dawn's nothing but a space-legend, a bedtime story to scare the kids!"

Wolfit and T-Rees were not smiling. "No, Captain. The Cerullean Dawn is neither one of those. She exists."

"And what makes you so sure she exists," Han asked, at once skeptical and amused.

"I've seen her."

"Star-struck!"

"Listen to me! I was on the Mandate Harbinger out beyond Toovool. The Dawn was there, too." Wolfit's face was like stone, his black eyes bright with a distant horror. "They all died. She killed them all, all but me. The ship was destroyed. I got away in a lifeboat..."

Han was not smiling now. The disappearance of the Mandate Harbinger was a fact, and Wolfit's discomfiture was painfully obvious, but he was not convinced. Rather he had the sinking feeling he had chartered out to a madman. "All right, Wolfit," he said equitably, "let's say she does exist -- the phantom starship of the spaceways. Let's even say you've actually seen her. Why, if what they say is true, do you want to see her again? She almost killed you."

"Captain Solo, this may be difficult for you to understand..."

"Bet on it."

"But let me start over again. Perhaps if I...Forgive me. I owe you the whole story." Wolfit composed himself, drew a breath. Han waited patiently. "You see," he began, "T-Rees and I are parapsychologists. We are adepts, psychics, if you will. Each one alone is powerful in his own right, but together we are able to generate a... well...a force capable of projecting...Captain Solo, this is difficult to explain in layman's terms."

"I'm sure it is, Wolfit," Han said unhelpfully.

"What it boils down to is this: I believe that those manifestations produced by proximity to the Cerullean Dawn..."

"The mass insanity, the suicides of whole crews, the disintegration of entire vessels," T-Rees put in.

"Yes," Wolfit continued, "what struck the Mandate Harbinger. These so-far-unexplained catastrophes are a result of an alien resonance produced by her exits from hyperspace into space normal. I believe she is not of our world at all, but from another continuum or dimension, one where what we think of as paranormal is normal. The juxtaposition of her aura, so full of psychic energy, with that of anything in our world is devastating. It's as though she were jamming or scrambling every logical, molecular construct. And," he added emphatically, "I do not believe she is malevolent of intent. I think she is seeking a way back to wherever she hails from."

Solo glanced from Wolfit to T-Rees. "And you?"

"I agree with Narodian Wolfit."

Han dropped his head to half-hide a smile. Once, a girl had sung him a song about the Cerullean Dawn. She had made it seem real at the time. But that was different. He spread his hands. "For the time being, I'll buy it."

"Then you will agree to aid us on our mission?" T-Rees asked with a touch more animation than she'd shown before.

"Sure, sure," Han replied easily. "For the money you're paying we can go water-witch on Rampa if you want. Just one thing: I'm not going to ask who's funding this little expedition, because it's none of my business." He had stowed the 25,000 upfront in the tiny private safe in his quarters. "But I've got to know, Wolfit. Why me?"

"To answer your unasked question, I am my own financier. My resources are for all practical purposes limitless."

"That would be nice," Han muttered.

Wolfit looked sheepish then. Chewie reiterated Solo's question with an interrogative woof.

"Captain, I did not select you at random." Tangentally it appeared, he suddenly asked, "Are you not aware of a certain instinctive intuition you possess? Surely you're aware of your inherent ability to second guess your adversaries? Captain Solo, you must know of your own rather extraordinary reputation for making seemingly reckless split-second decisions which somehow always turn to your advantage. You are, perhaps not a legend exactly, but certainly your uncanny abilities are discussed."

Han was watching the parapsychologist warily. He knew he had an errtic sort of luck which operated fitfully and he did rely heavily on what he termed "inspiration," but how it all tied into ghostly starships he couldn't say.

"So," Wolfit continued, "when I organized this venture I knew I should need the services of the very best man for the job. This may displease you, but I gained access to certain files -- I do have academicians' priority credentials, you see -- to certain cadet files logged at the Corellian Space Academy."

Han started to protest angrily, but Wolfit held up his right hand palm outward and suddenly Han felt a wave of calm engulf him. At last he began to comprehend something of the psychic force Wolfit had spoken of. This was not a madman's raving. This was power. He lowered himself into the computer service chair.

"Thank you, Captain. Please hear me out. I did see your records. Your score on the Para-Prescience Acuity Curve was the highest ever recorded at the Academy. They never told you, did they?"

Solo shook his head, subdued, but fascinated.

"They never do. In fact they discourage the talent where it does crop up -- highly original inspirations are not militarily desirable. But it's there nonetheless, an enormous, nearly untapped reservoir of psychic energy within your mind. Now you know why we want...why we need you with us."

"If what you say is true..."

"It is, I assure you."

Solo had an urge to change the subject. The strangeness of the revelations confronting him were uncomfortable and led to introspection for which he was unprepared. To forestall self-analysis, he ventured in the silence that followed, "You said there was another member of your team."

"Ah, of course! Here," said Wolfit, breaking into the first thing he'd managed all day that resembled a smile. He put the case on the gaming table and flipped the locks.

Solo moved closer to look. Inside was a spare rectangular framework supporting an amazingly complex entrelac of multi-hued wire. There appeared to be a control area on one end, although it was difficult to tell. Han thought it looked like an art form.

"This," said Wolfit fondly, "is Interface, or just Face. He is the first and only of his kind, Captain -- a hyperspatial tracking device. I constructed him out of theory, but he works. Don't you, Face?"

"I do," the machine replied in a metallic computer voice which somehow managed to convey a hint of personality.

Han was staring at the thing with loathing. "You mean this...invention of yours can actually follow a ship into hyperspace, track her, and exit with her?"

"That's exactly what I mean, Captain." Wolfit sounded pleased.

Han swore under his breath. "You have any idea what you've done? If this gets popular with the authorities -- or anyone else for that matter -- it just about puts an end to a lot of livelihoods. And a lot of lives," said Solo, who had been known to use hyperspace as a vast, dark forest in which to lose himself.

Wolfit looked startled.

It was T-Rees who answered. She had moved around the table to stand beside him. Very gently she put a hand upon his arm. "Do not be alarmed. While Narodian was inventing his device, I was perfecting my own -- an Interface jammer. Correct, Face?"

"You have done so."

"Does it function?"

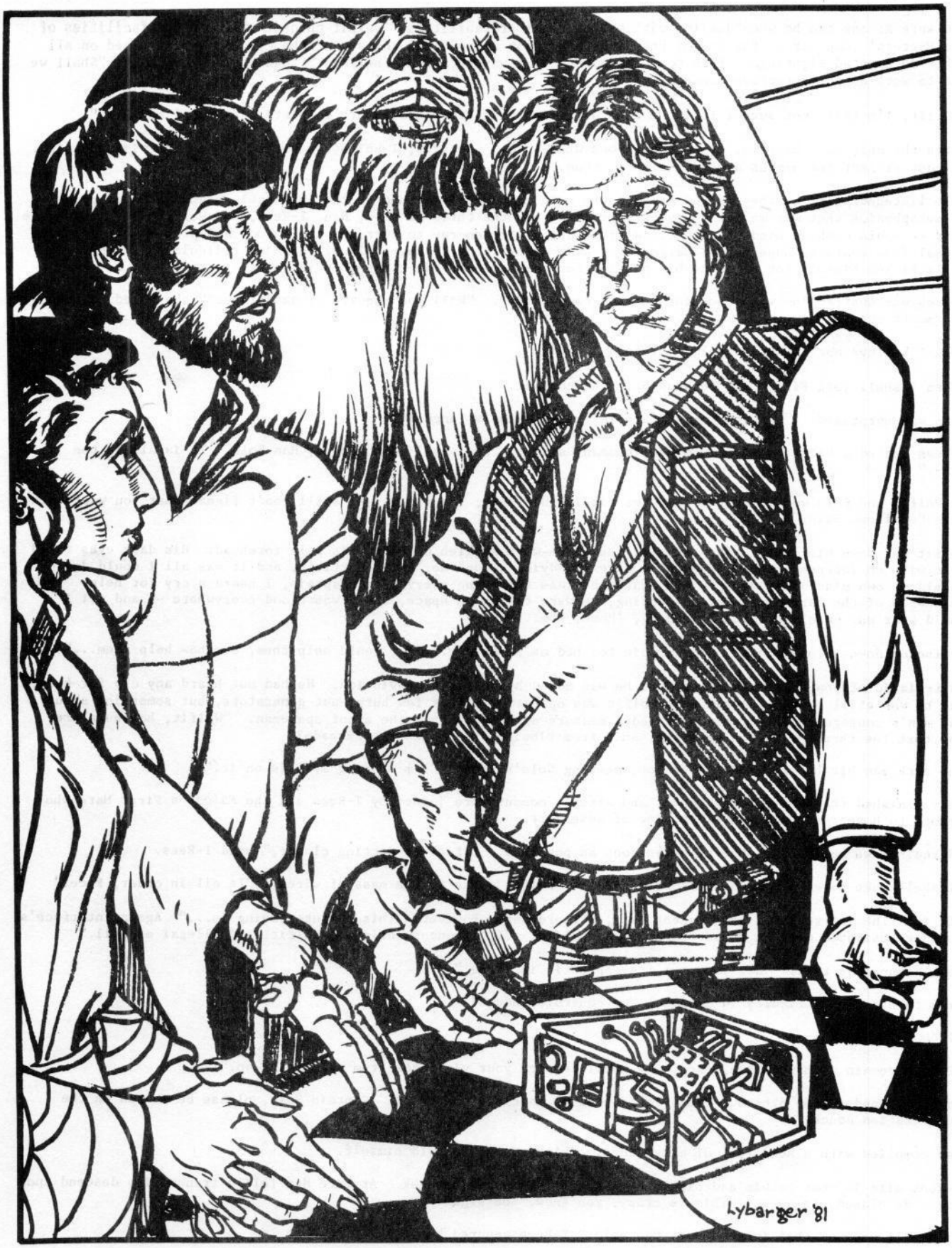
"Optimally. It renders me senseless."

"You see, Han Solo, I too care for the wary and the threatened."

Perhaps it was her perfume, or perhaps her light touch was transmitting some psychic pulse -- Solo was ready to believe almost anything at this point -- but he felt a familiar stirring which was often inconvenient though ever-pleasant. He glanced down at her, seeing the waves of soft dark hair gathered around her face, the sculptured profile, and found himself smiling. It annoyed him that his responses appeared to be so deftly manipulated by these two and he vowed to exert his own brand of control at every opportunity, but he was still smiling.

* * *

Bright points of stars became streaks, great swaths of fire that coalesced into a vast canopy of eye-searing brilliance. With her familiar howl of power, the *Millennium Falcon* went super-light.


Lybarger '81

Han shut down all space normal operations. "Are you sure these coordinates you supplied will get us where you want to be?" he asked.

"As sure as one can be when dealing with mathematical probabilities," Wolfit chided. "I used the facilities of the Masters' computer at the School Pre-eminate to plot a projected course for the Cerullean Dawn based on all other documented sightings. Then too," he added, "I always trust my feelings." Han was noncommital. "Shall we get to work on the Interface hook-up?"

"Wolfit, I'm still not sure I like the idea of giving that tin box of yours complete control of my ship."

"It's the only way, Captain. Interface knows what to do. Besides, I believe we will all be otherwise occupied. We must project the nimbus around the ship, then..."

Solo listened again as they walked back to the main computer, listened to the improbable sounding hodge-podge of metaphysics that was Wolfit's way of explaining how the three of them, Han, T-Rees, and Wolfit -- in trine, he said -- would combine minds to project a field of psychic energy to surround the *Falcon* and protect her in space normal from whatever supernormal barrage the Dawn might throw at them. It all sounded ridiculous, and Han mentally kicked himself for allowing his passion for cash to override his better judgment.

T-Rees was unstrapping when they entered the compartment. "Will you require my assistance?" she asked, standing to smooth out her gown.

"Oh, I believe not. Captain Solo will lend a hand."

"Then I shall join First Mate Chewbacca in the cockpit."

Solo was surprised. "Can you communicate in that Wookiee's language?"

T-Rees smiled a beautiful, yet somehow inhuman, smile. "It is all in the mind, Han Solo. It is all in the mind."

As Wolfit and Solo worked on the computer tie-in, Han said, "By the way, I still can't figure what you want with this Cerullean Dawn."

Wolfit put down his instruments and slid the close-work goggles up on to his pale forehead. His dark eyes fixed Solo with an intense stare. "When they were all dying around me, dying horribly, and it was all I could do to shield my own mind and body from the death that was spreading everywhere, Captain, I heard a cry for help. The bulkheads of the Harbinger were collapsing, we were taking on space, there was blood everywhere -- and all I could hear was an alien voice, pleading, 'Home, home.'"

He looked down at his hands. "Their pain touched me so deeply...If I could help them, somehow help them..."

"Altruistic of you," Han commented, yet he was moved by Wolfit's conviction. He had not heard any cry for help, and he was still half-convinced that Wolfit was operating with a few burnt-out generators, but something about the man's courage and persistance pulled a measure of respect from the aloof spaceman. "Wolfit, how sure are you that the three of us can keep that ship from blowing the *Falcon's* bulkheads?"

The dark man bit his lip. He looked up, meeting Solo's eyes. "I'm staking my life on it."

They finished the hook-up in silence, and after a moment were joined by T-Rees and the *Falcon's* First Mate who seemed to have reached an understanding of some sort.

"Narodian, we must affect the trine as soon as possible. I feel it getting closer," said T-Rees.

"I shall make sure Face is operational, first." Wolfit spoke to the mass of wires. "Is all in order, Face?"

"It is. The interstitial arrangement is...extraordinary, however. This computer being is..." Again Interface's vocoder hesitated with an almost human perturbality. "It is unconventional, Wolfit, and illegal as well."

Solo grinned at that. "Bet your sweet synapses it is, Face."

"You foresee no difficulty in managing the controls though?"

"I do not."

"Please remain with us, then, Face. We shall require your vigilance from this point on."

Wolfit turned to the others. "Yes, it is time to initiate the trine. Captain Solo, please be seated on the acceleration couch."

Han complied with a head full of misgivings. Think money, he told himself.

T-Rees slid in next to him and placed a cool palm against his cheek. At once Han felt a tranquility descend upon him. He closed his eyes. "This is crazy, you know," he sighed.

"You will not say that in a moment, Han Solo," T-Rees assured him.

Wolfit touched hands with T-Rees.

Chewie stood back, watching with concern, wondering how much of what he'd divulged mentally to T-Rees of Solo's inner self would be germaine to this triangular symbiosis.

The three began to breath in rhythm, eyes closed. There was a tension developing in their muscles, a pressure flowing through, around and among them. Chewie felt his pelt stirring as if in the presence of great electrical energy.

Han was flying. There was a sensation of acceleration and speed, a surge against g-force that pulled at his body, and yet he knew he was still seated on the couch, relaxed, stretched out languidly with a strange woman's hand on his face. The sensation of motion reached a peak and faded, leaving him tingling, charged. There was within him now a vibrant expectancy.

Chewie growled softly. The figure of his friend was glowing with a wavering blue light, as were those of the other two, save their's were dimmer against the luminousity emanating from Han Solo.

T-Rees was the first to speak. "We have achieved trine," she said with satisfaction.

"This is trine?" asked Solo.

"We are integrated now in psychic rhythm. As in the laser phenomenon we reinforce one another's power, each one amplifying the other. This is trine," Wolfit agreed.

"Project the nimbus now," T-Rees said. "Think of our auras extending beyond our bodies, beyond this chamber. Imagine them merging, enveloping the *Millennium Falcon* in an impenetrable shield of force. Imagine this."

Han was intoxicated with the sound of her voice. With an inner eye he saw the *Falcon's* exterior, watched with interest as a blue flame rolled over her hull, flickering and dancing. It was cold and strong and impervious. The nimbus completed its confluence. It was beautiful. The *Falcon* hung suspended like a strange jewel in a crystal fire against the chaotic nothingness of hyperspace.

"Thus we defend ourselves," T-Rees murmurred, "Is it not magnificient?"

"Face," said Wolfit, "have we sufficient energy among us?"

"To the best of my ability to calculate, yes," the computer answered.

"Then let the aura dissipate now. We shall conserve our strength."

Like a heavy sigh at the end of long labor, Solo felt the prevailing energy ebb away, leaving him drained and empty, but content. It felt something like...He glanced quickly at T-Rees. She was turned toward him, and their eyes met. "Yes," she told him with a comprehending smile, "it is all in the mind."

The anamolous computer voice interjected. "We are approaching the exit point to space normal."

Chewie spared a look at his partner before turning to shuffle off toward the cockpit.

"Hey, wait up," Han called after him. He pushed himself away from the couch, surprised to find that he felt no weakness or disorientation, and relishing the sensation of physical motion. Striding after Chewbacca he sought to shake off the lingering strangeness with which the two psychics had touched him.

After a moment T-Rees said, "Is he everything you had hoped for?"

"And more. Why did you come?"

"Because I knew I would be needed."

"You love him, don't you?"

"What is love, Narodian Wolfit? He draws me like air into a vacuum. I have touched him. Should I do no more, yet I have come closer to the Force than I have any right to."

"He will not understand."

"No," she agreed, "he will not. But there are gifts I can give him..."

* * *

The *Millennium Falcon* hung dead in space, in an inter-system void somewhere between Danis and Urango on the edge of the ARC. It was a strange setting, wholly unsuited for the words which T-Rees uttered suddenly into the middle of a desultory conversation. Half-rising, eyes fixed on some point far beyond the *Falcon*, she said, "The Dawn is coming."

"I verify," added Interface.

Wolfit had risen too. He seemed to be straining outward with his mind, probing for data.

Solo, still baffled by the awesome psychic energy he was discovering within himself, merely waited. "Chewie," he asked the Wookiee quietly, "what were you and T-Rees so close about earlier?"

Chewie looked at him with that curiously assessing expression he had developed since his communication with T-Rees. Han thought he could read concern there, and other things less easy to decipher. The Wookiee replied in a few terse syllables.

Han was surprised. He looked to the Nefressa, still standing, leaning forward, hands on the table. Her dark hair had come loose and fallen in long, soft coils. The subtle irregularity of her features was intensified by her state of semi-trance. She was luminous and powerful, like a priestess or oracle. She had asked the Wookiee, "Who is Han Solo?"

Wolfit tore himself away from the prescient vision. "Interface," he demanded, "are you ready to initiate jump and tracking procedures?"

"I am."

"First Mate Chewbacca will serve as our monitor at the manual controls. Captain Solo, you will remain here with us to initiate the nimbus. At the appropriate moment Interface will take whatever measures are necessary for us to follow the Cerullean Dawn."

Han didn't care at all for the man's high-handed usurpation of the captain's prerogative, but he saw the wisdom of keeping his council until a more relaxed moment. At least Wolfit seemed to know what was going on, which was more than Han himself could say.

He slipped into mind-lock with the other two smoothly this time, as though he'd been doing it all his life. His inner eye fixed on the *Falcon's* hull; he watched the blue flame once more embrace his ship.

Into the dead stillness there came a hint of sound and motion at the edge of psychic awareness, a presence making itself felt as it moved closer. There was menace and dread, growing stronger until it became a pandemonic howling of alien madness. It reached out to rend and devastate and kill -- and was turned back by the intangible barrier of the force field like a wave breaking against an invisible sea wall.

Then Chewbacca in the cockpit with his unaided eyes and the trine with their para-vision saw, at the core of the horror, the Cerullean Dawn.

Blue she was an amorphous, a long arcing trail of evil fire that could have been made of the same stuff as their auras, but huge and flamboyant with explosive swirls like solar flare.

"Our auras challenge one another," said T-Rees, as though asleep.

"Captain Solo, are you wearied? Can you continue to maintain the trine?"

"I don't know, because I don't know how long I have to go."

"Face! Can you read anything from her? Are you receiving telemetry?"

"I can. I am. She is seeking."

All around the *Millennium Falcon* the chaos raged.

Han was sweating now, beginning to feel the tension cramping his muscles. T-Rees slipped her hand into his, supporting him, giving him strength from her own deep well-spring of power. He tightened his grip on her fingers, breathed deeply and reasserted his force with more assurance.

In the cockpit, Chewie watched with apprehension. Systems began to come on automatically as Interface initiated jump procedures.

"She is seeking no longer," the computer-tracker said.

The ghost ship, as if she were an impossibly vast bird of prey, spread her paraboloid aura like wings. Her streaming lines of blue energy became attenuated, and she wavered transparently with only a slight hold on space normal.

"Look at her jump," Han sighed.

There was a rolling metallic peal as though an awesome bell had been struck somewhere in the galaxy. In the Cerullean Dawn's echoing wake, Face hurled the *Millennium Falcon* into hyperspace.

Within the non-existance of the *Falcon's* drive field, the trine allowed the nimbus to dissipate. They drew breath, marshalling their reserves of strength.

T-Rees brought Solo's hand to her lips and kissed it lightly in a humble gesture that astonished him. "Sharing trine with you is an honor," she said. Her eyes were a shade more like gold than anything else he could name, and if there were messages there, he was unable to read them.

Chewie appeared at the passageway. Han turned away from the woman. "Trouble?"

The Wookiee shook his head.

"Something's eating you, pal," Solo said. He gestured with his eyes for a parlay in the cockpit.

When they had taken their accustomed seats, Solo said, "Okay. Let's have it, what's the problem?"

He listened gravely for a moment, looking not at Chewbacca, but out into the hyper void. Presently he said, still facing away from his friend, "I know, Chewie. NO! Hell, I DON'T know! But listen, when this thing's over we'll take the money and run and we won't think about anything more complicated than women and booze for a standard year." Turning suddenly with a grin he landed a punch on the Wookiee's shaggy shoulder. "Hey!" he said, "we'll give the Professor his money's worth then it'll be business as usual, partner. I mean it."

But for the first time since he'd met Han Solo, Chewbacca felt alone.

Returning to the forward compartment, Solo handed Wolfit an ultimatum. "As soon as we re-enter space normal I want the controls of the *Falcon* back on my board."

"But Interface can..."

"I know what Interface can do, Wolfit. But, she's my ship and I'm going to fly her."

"But what about the trine? We must protect the ship at space normal?"

"I'll trine all you like, but I'll do it from the cockpit."

"Captain Solo, your attitude puts us all at an unnecessary risk."

"Wolfit, this whole thing is an unnecessary risk, if you ask me. But I'm not going any further like this -- you can have your money back -- I take the controls of my ship from here on."

"Listen to him, Narodian," said T-Rees.

"Perhaps you're right," said Wolfit, unconvinced. "Interface is designed to track through hyperspace, however, I still feel uneasy..."

"Either I run the ship, Wolfit, or it's no go. Make up your mind."

"Interface," asked T-Rees, "have you input?"

"I have. I agree with Captain Solo."

"Two votes of confidence," said Han pleasantly.

Wolfit gave in. "I'll instruct Face to disconnect from the ship's controls but if there is no objection I shall keep him operational for his computations, and, of course, his tracking abilities."

"Fine with me. Face has got some sense."

Wolfit gave Interface instructions for redirecting the *Falcon's* control circuitry upon re-entry to space normal.

"That should be soon, Wolfit," Interface said. "The Cerullean Dawn just exited hyperspace."

"Give us some clearance, Face," Han yelled over his shoulder, as he sprinted for the cockpit. Wolfit and T-Rees followed quickly situating themselves in the communications service chair and navigator's station respectively. Here they established trine.

For the first time with his unaided eyes, Han was able to watch the nimbus forming. It looked like a fragile veil, a bare breath of color. He thought about the *Falcon's* defensive shields, the massive, invisible energy absorbing deflectors that could protect her from furious laser bombardment. How many times his and Chewbacca's lives had depended on the integrity of the shields, and how useless they would be against the psychic force of the Cerullean Dawn. This ephermeral haze of palest blue was by far the most powerful shield Solo had ever imagined.

Her psychic corona replacing the warp drive field, The *Falcon* materialized into space normal half a light behind the Dawn.

"I'm receiving something," said the ultra-sensitive T-Rees. "Amost a come-hither...I'm not sure. It is wildly obscure."

"Could you talk her into a cease-fire?" asked Han.

"Captain, you must remember she IS non-agressive. She is a...ah...a Brockoderon blundering through the jungles of Aca smashing all the tiny Tweets! She has no desire to harm us. I know this!"

"Wish I was as sure as you," Han said, dividing his time between flying and maintaining his third of the protective shielding. At the distance he was keeping, the Dawn's psychic force was perhaps not lethal but could nonetheless have rendered them helpless, should the nimbus fail.

Han was finding it absurdly easy to tap the reservoir of energy within his mind and utilize it. And not only to operate from a level of his anima of which he'd been unaware until a few hours ago, but to perform this arcane exercise almost effortlessly while handling a multitude of more prosaic tasks. T-Rees might have told him why he was able to do this, but it never occured to ask him. He accepted it as he did each of the wildly improbable situations that seasoned his life -- with an up-front philosophy that rarely looked beneath the surface.

Chewie growled something.

"Yeah, I see. She's making for the sixth planet. Wolfit, do you have any idea were in the galaxy we are? My charts don't register this sector of space at all."

"None, Captain. You might see what Face can tell us. He's still tied into the communications system."

"We'll hold a high orbit until we know more."

The Cerullean Dawn banked into the planet's gravity well and dove through the murky gray soup of its atmosphere.

Suddenly T-Rees, who had been extending herself further than the others to pick up impressions, cried, "It is gone! The hurtfulness! No, not gone...wait..."

The others turned their attention to the woman. She gripped the arms of the chair, staring at nothing they could see, once more the oracle. "It is," she searched for a word, "...dampled, mitigated somhow by the planet's atmosphere." She touched each of them with a glance. "We may disturb the nimbus. The Dawn has lead us here so that communication can take place. Something down there," she indicated the gray ball hanging a dozen diameters before them, "is blocking the psychic energy."

Experimentally they let the aura dissipate. Nothing happened.

"We go in," said Solo.

* * *

She was a kilometer long. Shorn of her roiling curves of force, she looked like nothing any of the four had ever seen. Long, narrow -- the usual spacial descriptions simply would not enfold comfortably around her mind-bendingly alien hull. It it were possible, Solo would have said she was alive.

From the *Falcon*, poised on her landing gear a hundred meters back, three made their way over the spare, rocky terrain until they stood almost close enough to touch the terrible, unmetallic hull of the Cerullean Dawn.

The planetary field that damped psychic energy also distorted sound, they discovered. Speech had a claustrophobic, underwater quality that made them think of pushing their words toward one another.

"So, what now, Professor?"

"Contact, I suppose."

T-Rees stood behind Solo, her hand unconsciously resting on his shoulder. Her hair was disheveled. Her golden eyes were wide with awe. "I shall try to establish a link of some sort," she whispered. Moving past Han, she raised the hem of her skirt a fraction to step over a rock, and he saw she was barefoot.

"Should we let her, Wolfit?" Han asked, frowning.

"It is her reason for being here, that and another. Do not let your gallantry stand between a man and his destiny -- or a woman."

T-Rees stood at the base of the Cerullean Dawn, dwarfed to insect stature by the enormous curve of her hull. She extended her arms straight out to either side, palms forward, fingers splayed, and slowly brought them around until her hands contacted the alien surface. She stood there for some moments, her dark head lowering little by little until it seemed as though she would push the huge thing, or roll it away.

Suddenly she screamed, tearing her hands from the Dawn's surface and hurling herself back. Turning half away she fell into Solo's arms with a cry.

"Get her back to the ship!" shouted Wolfit.

Han swept her up in his arms and followed the other man at a stumbling run. Chewie shot the hatch as they staggered upon the ramp.

Ignoring his partner's worried hoot, Han carried T-Rees to the acceleration couch where he let her lie stretched out on one side. Wolfit knelt beside her, hands cupping her face. Han backed off, unsure of what to do, unsure of what could be done. He backed into Chewie.

"You were keeping an eye on us -- did you see anything?"

Chewie's reply was negative. They watched, worried, while Wolfit bent over the woman's inert form. Solo could see her slender, delicate feet. They were torn and bleeding, smeared with dust, and the sight filled him with sadness.

"Captain," Wolfit said presently, turning his dark countenance on them, "have you a medikit?"

"Of course." Han immediately went for the traveling emergency facility. "Will she be all right?" he asked, kneeling beside Wolfit and handing him the items he requested.

"Yes, I believe so. It is her hands that are maimed. Look." Han bit back an oath. The Nefressa's palms were

an ugly, raw color, gleaming with clear fluid and beginning to swell. Wolfit ministered to them with competent medical skill and finally bound them in cloth.

"No syntheflesh?"

"For you or the Wookiee, perhaps. A Nefressa's molecular structure is different. No, she will heal them herself, from within."

It sounded far-fetched, but Solo had learned enough by now to keep a tight rein on his skepticism where these two were concerned.

It was not long by cosmic clock but it seemed a great while, before T-Rees' eyes fluttered open. She gasped, and tried to rise as though she would flee. Wolfit restrained her, soothed her with words. She appeared distraught and disoriented, and Solo could well understand if she'd touched such an awesome thing as the alien intellect. By stages she found composure.

Again, Han and Chewie stood aloof and watched the two psychics, so sensitive one to the other, so close in their world of mind touch and emotional inflection. And yet it was to Solo that T-Rees looked first when a measure of calm had returned to her.

"Captain, I must tell you what I have learned." Her bandaged hands gestured beseechingly. "There is a thing we must do...a thing YOU must do, with Narodian and myself to assist you."

Han felt tired, confused and mortally weary of the whole paranormal theme, yet he had agreed to go along with it -- for money. He made a mental note to remember this in the future.

With a sigh, he let himself down onto the couch. "What is it? To be honest with you, I'm about done in."

T-Rees looked at him directly. "I know, and I know why. And it is because of this that we must act now."

Her intensity immediately alerted him. He raised an eyebrow, and even that seemed an effort. Chewie leaned against a bulkhead. Wolfit sat beside T-Rees, head in hands.

"Han Solo," the Nafrassa said very gently, "you, I, we are all dying."

Even this seemed trivial to Han against the enormous wave of inertia all but paralyzing him. Yet some survival instinct flared. He looked up at her.

"It is the damping field. I do not understand it, but it is true. The Cerullean Dawn -- it is an entity, not a ship -- did not realize the atmosphere would be inimical to our life forms, only that we could be free of our incompatible essences for a brief period of communication. She is from another dimension as we suspected, one in which all things function by reason of paranormal energy. As a creature she moves through her own space/time by..." T-Rees closed her eyes to see once again the non-verbal vision. She fought for a understandable metaphor. "...by extending a sail into the psychic wind. Her entrance into our universe was an accident. But here there is no psychic wind. She was forced to generate her own field to power her movements -- each jump a frantic reaching for her own continuum. Her life pattern dictates that she continue to seek, and she will, hopelessly, murdering in innocence, unless we can give her the one thing she thirsts for and yet cannot find in this world -- a source of psychic energy powerful enough to push her home. To do this we must free ourselves of this atmosphere. Now!"

Han felt her urgency flow around him. It gave him the necessary impetus to push himself up, leaning against the table, and stagger sideways. Chewie had slid to the floor. He howled pitifully.

With enormous effort, Han made his way to the cockpit.

The ship was floored with treacle, the air palpable and resistant. If he could just reach the controls and initiate the automatic lift sequence...he fell into the pilot's seat groping across the board with a hand that was too heavy to support. He activated controls, flipped a switch, and groaned mentally. The ship was dead.

He thumbed intra-ship communications. "T-Rees," he whispered, "tell Face to take over. Wolfit was right. He must've known..."

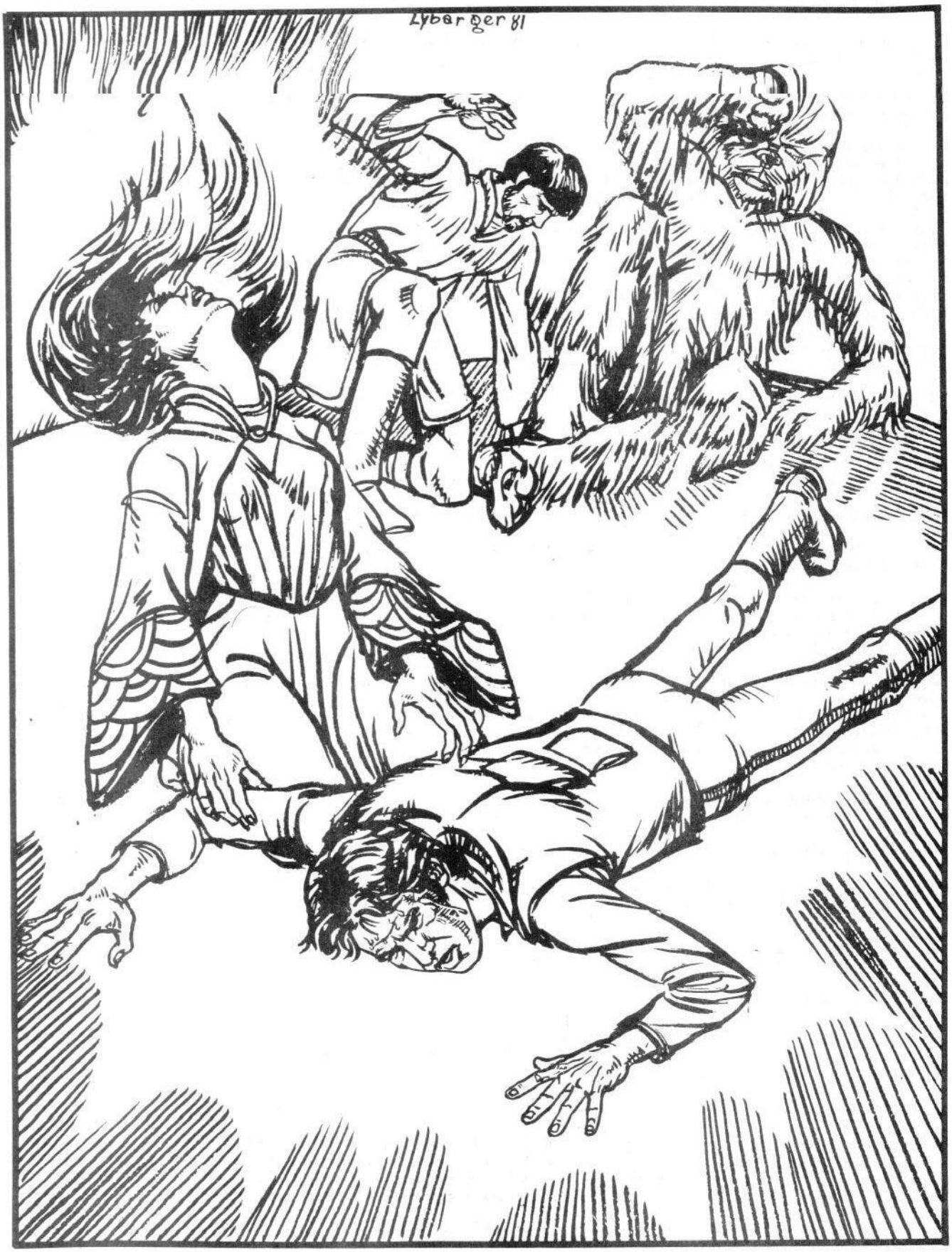
There was no reply.

Han fought to remain conscious, but he knew he could not hold out much longer. He leaned back painfully. Darkness was crowding around the edges of his vision. Vaguely he heard a voice whispering, but it said no words he knew. He was dropping down a deep, dark well.

Suddenly there was a multitudinous rush of sensation -- sounds, lights, the pressure of g-force building.

Han snapped forward at the controls of the throbbing starship. Every onboard system had come to life and was ringing, clanging and hooting for attention. He let out a yell of triumph, husky, painful, but definitely jubilant, seeing the ghost-grey death planet hanging in space before him. Communication was still open. "Face, you just earned a quarter share!" he shouted. "Chewie, are you there?"

A hairy hand landed on his shoulder, followed by Chewie's roar of good spirits. They laughed together, then, for release, for many affirmative reasons.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Finding himself and his partner alive and sound and their ship humming at peak efficiency caused a few unworthy thoughts to pass quickly through Han's mind, not the least of which was one having to do with ducking into hyperspace and forgetting he'd ever heard of a Cerullean Dawn.

Narodian Wolfit appeared at his elbow. "Come, Captain, we must move now. T-Rees feels urgency emanating from the Cerullean Dawn. We must generate enough force...What is the matter, Captain Solo?"

Han was laughing, not only at Wolfit's unique sense of timing, but at his own reactions. He had been about to say that he was through being used for everyone else's busy purposes like some idiot savant. But he stood obediently and walked past Wolfit, grinning ruefully.

Han was shocked at T-Rees' appearance. It seemed that as she dealt ever more closely with paranormal phenomena her sense of self was diminished. She looked like a waif -- dirty, bare feet, her carefully wrapped bandages beginning to come loose as she ran fingers through her wild and unruly hair. The alien look was intensified as she sat heedlessly cross-legged on the deck, probing the Cerullean Dawn in semi-trance. Wolfit caught at Han's thought.

"It is this way with a Nafrassa, with T-Rees the adept. Her 'self' wanes precariously at moments of high psychic intensity. When this is over she will remember who she is. Come, we must begin."

With Face controlling the *Falcon* once more, and Chewbacca, who refused to remain in the cockpit, watching from the main computer bank, the three gathered on the deck.

"It is almost time," T-Rees intoned.

Wolfit explained to Solo. "This is what we must do: T-Rees and I shall form the nimbus between us. I believe we can maintain it for a short period of time. You, Captain Solo, are far more powerful than either of us and you will have the task of throwing the Dawn clear of our continuum. There is no need of subtlety, only sheer force. Try to project as much psychic energy as you are capable of, and when you think you have reached your limit, project more. Further than this I cannot guide you."

"Now! Now!" cried T-Rees.

Immediately the three fell into rhythm.

"Not in trine," Wolfit cautioned.

Han pulled away from the familiar configuration and ranged out on his own, literally Solo, past the corona, through the cold of space to where the Cerullean Dawn waited, a blue-charged menace, seething with force.

He extended invisible fingers and touched her essence, comprehending her form and the spatial-logic relationships which bound her, learning her in the briefest moment of profoundly intimate contact. He relinquished his hold, moved back and, like a man expelling a forceful breath, released a measure of psychic energy. Her corona flared and expanded, she roared soundlessly. Again he assaulted her with force. She drank it in hungrily, swelling and flaring, building her charge. He lashed out a third time with more power than he'd dreamed possible.

She couldn't absorb it. The richness of Han's psychic field overloaded her receptors, filled and overflowed her extended sail. She flared out to infinity, hovered...

Aboard the *Millennium Falcon*, some part of Han Solo felt his body being wrenched and buffeted. He went sprawling across the deck, still throwing force at the alien.

Suddenly Chewbacca, whose eyes had not left his friend, and whose vigilance on his behalf went beyond friendship, saw something that the others, engrossed as they were, could not have noticed: a transparency was becoming noticeable, growing inward from Han's fingertips, and the toes of his boots. Chewie bellowed frantically, cursing himself for having never mastered any language but his own.

T-Rees looked up, startled, wild-eyed. Chewie dragged her around to see Solo spread-eagle on the deck, his sweat-streaked face turning from side to side, the transparency becoming more pronounced.

"Do not break the field!" Wolfit hissed urgently.

"It's taking him! Oh no! No! It's taking him!" the woman screamed.

Oblivious to Wolfit's panic, T-Rees tore her mind out of link. At once the nimbus began to waver.

"I can't hold it alone!" the man wailed.

The deck buckled and heaved, righted itself. A primal howl of madness shrieked through the *Falcon*. Cargo containers began to vibrate. Several lifted free of the deck and went sailing across the compartment slamming into bulkheads. Wind rushed against them, crying louder than the psychic scream.

T-Rees threw herself across Han's body. The locker flew open disgorging hydrospanners, fuser and other hardware. A lase-welder caught her across the cheek drawing blood. She ignored it. "Solo! Han Solo!" she gasped, cupping his face with her bleeding hands. She dug her toes into the deck ridges, fighting for purchase against the furious wind.

The *Falcon* tipped, dropped sickeningly and began to swing in a nauseating arc. Chewbacca staggered and lost his footing. Above him a power routing conduit sizzled and broke apart in a dazzling cascade of sparks. The heavy conduit crashed against the side of his skull, taking him to his knees. A hideous despair filled his mind as the deck threw him again into a metal support ribbing. There was pain and cold, and he hoped for death to take him quickly. As blackness descended, he saw a vision: a wild Nafressa woman kneeling beside his friend's body, head back, howling, while around her raged all the fires of hell.

The Cerullean Dawn hovered on the verge of existence, her grip on reality becoming tenuous in the force of Solo's psychic blast. She wavered...

T-Rees drew the force from Solo's mind as quickly as she was able, demanding it from him, absorbing it, though it racked and tormented her. Moaning in anguish, she pulled the last of his psychic energy away into her own mind. She flung her arms wide like a sacrificial victim. The blue fire engulfed her. Her form wavered like the Dawn, turned to crystal...

Together, the Cerullean Dawn and the woman who had been T-Rees were gone.

In the silence that followed, Narodian Wolfit found himself weeping.

Presently a familiar voice intruded on his grief.

"Wolfit," said Face. "I offer my congratulations on a successful mission."

"Interface. I did give you a few human interpretations, didn't I?"

"You did."

"Then tell me, Face, what shall I do now?"

There was a pause then the computer said, "Return things to their original state. One must not stand between a man and his destiny."

"She knew he had a destiny. She must have. Her prescience...it's why she loved him." He was staring at the empty deck next to Solo's body.

"I shall excise a portion of the *Falcon's* log, and you must return what you've taken, Wolfit. Perhaps it will help you."

"You're right, Face. How right you are."

Painfully, Wolfit staggered to his feet. He crossed the littered deck to where the Wookiee lay crumpled against the corridor wall. Fingers, both psychic and of flesh, probed Chewbacca's injuries, setting the healing process in motion. He then reached deeper into the Wookiee and deftly culled several days worth of stored impressions, added a few things.

Wolfit moved to Han Solo. As T-Rees had left him when she drained him of the lethal force, he lay supine, his limbs angled randomly, his breathing shallow.

"Han Solo," Wolfit murmured, "what did she foresee?" His hand touched the unconscious man's forehead, brushed back a strand of brown-gold hair. "Did she leave you anything? I wonder..." Reaching into Solo's mind, Wolfit met with a feisty, blue knot. It resisted his touch like a fractious child. The psychic smiled inwardly. "And I suppose inspiration is your specialty," he said. Leaving the little prescience-force, Wolfit busied himself with excising a portion of Solo's memory. Satisfied that he had done what he could, he rose on cramped and battered muscles and began to clean up the awful mess.

* * *

"I feel terrible." Han Solo attempted to sit up, failed, and was very sorry he'd even thought of raising his head. "Chewie?" he called experimentally, fighting the dry stiffness of his lips and tongue.

There came a gratifying honk from somewhere neaby. Han tried to turn his head, regretted it.

Narodian Wolfit's face came into his field of vision, which until then had included nothing but the ceiling. "Captain Solo! Ah, you're conscious! How do you feel?"

"Don't ask," Han said sourly. "Look, uh, Wolfit, isn't it? I'm a little hazy...maybe you could fell me in?"

"Of course, Captain."

"And maybe first you can get me off the damn deck."

Wolfit leaned down with an arm ready to support his shoulders. On his other side, Han felt a familiar furry grip of superior strength buoy him up against the throbbing ache behind his temples. In a moment he was slouched against the padded curve of the acceleration couch, still feeling terrible, but more himself.

His clothing was torn, and in disarray, but his blaster was still slung at his right hip and, as far as he could tell, he was in possession of all his fingers, toes and sundry other essentials.

Wolfit, standing across from him looked tired, but composed.

Han was frustrated with his inability to remember recent history. "A Nefressa, right?"

"T-Rees is her name. She wished you well and left the prototype of her device with me to give to you with her compliments."

"Wolfit," Han said, "you're going to have to brief me or something. I can't remember a damn thing."

"Chewbacca will fill you in, I'm sure. It's far too technical for me."

Had had the feeling he was being evaded, but didn't pursue it. "So where are we?"

"Orbiting Blayk's Planet." Wolfit smiled wanly. "Home again. We were only gone a moment actually. But I should like to be assured that you are sound and whole before we resume our journey."

"And our journey was...?"

"Oh, of course. You and your First Mate were conveying me and my Interface to a conference on Quogash. 5,000 credit fee round trip. A bit boring I'm afraid..."

"I could use some 'boring' right now. I feel like I've been through the Gantrell Gauntlet backwards. But I think I'll survive."

"I'm sure you will, Captain," replied Wolfit with conviction. He wondered what Solo's reaction would be when he discovered the 25,000 credits stashed in his safe, and only regretted finding no way to bestow the other 75,000 credits without alerting Solo's suspicions. Perhaps an anonymous credit voucher...Wolfit nearly smiled.

"Well," Han said, standing, "give me a second to get it together and we'll be on our way." He felt vastly better already, light and even cheerful. The pain in his head was ebbing fast.

"Interface," Solo addressed the device sitting on the main computer device. "Thanks for getting us out of a tight spot -- too bad Wolfit's got a gadget to put you out of business."

"It is T-Rees' invention," Interface reminded him.

"Oh, yeah. Well, give the lady my very warmest regards."

Interface hesitated with his almost-human thought pattern before he answered. "They would be greatly appreciated, Captain. The lady certainly earned them."

Gunhand of Fate

part two

J.A. Berger

illustrated by Martynn

VIII

It was the strange low-keyed strain of Jewish chants that brought Tommy Lillard awake to the discomfort of his bround position. He stifled a groan as he attempted to sit up. The blanket that had been draped across him, fell away and he kicked it awkwardly off his legs. The fragrance of fresh coffee assaulted his senses, memory was not long returning as his attention centered on the tall figure at the firepit.

"How about some of that coffee? Or are you planning on starvin' me to death?"

Cord got to his feet and turned from the fire with a filled cup. He strolled in long-legged leisure to the bound Texan. "Hold out your hands."

Tommy thrust his bound wrists toward the offered cup. A penknife appeared in the gunman's hand and he cut the ropes. Tommy took the coffee. Relinquished the cup, the tall gunman stepped immediately out of reach should he decide to do more with the hot liquid than drink it. It was not going to be easy to catch the man off-guard.

"Does your friend sing every morning?" Cord asked casually, leaning a shoulder to the pine as Tommy siped at the hot beverage.

"Yeah, they're mornin' prayers." A sudden thought stayed the cup half-way to his lips as something in the tone of Avram's prayers attracted his attention. He remembered that particular prayer vividly. He took another careful sip. "Bet he's been at it for sometime. Surprised I slept through it."

A look of amusement filtered across the gunman's darkly handsome features. "You always sleep that sound?"

"Don't always have a man of your profession to watch over me."

Cord smiled, but made no comment.

Finishing the coffee, Tommy got stiffly to his feet, stretching cramped muscles, his mind toying with a situation Cord would soon have to face. He could not stifle the smile that pulled at the corner of his mouth. "Know much about the Jewish religion, Cord?" He asked innocently, reaching instinctly for the makings in his pocket. His hands came to a stop when he found himself looking into the muzzle of the wicked .44.

"Make sure your makings are all your hands come out with." Cord warned, the .44 was level with the Texan's belt buckle.

Tommy ignored the .44 and slowly fashioned himself a smoke. "That caterwallerin' you hear," he explained easily, "is a Jewish prayer for their sabbath. Today's Saturday, right?"

Cord nodded. "Thought Sunday was the sabbath?"

"Not to a Jew." Tommy drew the smoke gratefully into his lungs, then exhaled, allowing the pleasure of the tobacco to mingle with the aftermath of the strong coffee. "Saturday is their sabbath and they have some interesting ways of observin' it. Did you know a Jew won't work on Saturday? Won't even smoke. Come to think on it, they don't do much of anything on Saturday, except pray and read a book called the Talmud. Avram, there, he's a Rabbi, he can read from the Torah--their Bible."

Cord shrugged. "Not so different from other Sky Pilots...just a different day."

Tommy warmed to the subject as he wandered to the fire and poured himself another cup of coffee, conscious of the gray-green eyes following his every move. "Won't even touch money on Saturday, it's against his religion."

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"It's a religion you should have taken up," Cord offered in light sarcasm. "and you wouldn't be in this mess."

"Thought about it," Tommy admitted, the grin broadened and he turned back to the fire, "there's times, I've thought about it."

Cord pulled away from the pine and moved to the fire. "There's hardtack and beans. You'd better eat. We'll be ridin' soon."

"I don't think so," Tommy mumbled as he filled his plate.

"What did you say?"

"Nothing?" Tommy filled his mouth, his handsome features masked with hooded innocence.

The prayers finished, Avram moved into sight and joined the two men at the fire folding the Tfillin and Tsalis which he carefully packed away.

"The horses are saddled," Cord remarked, kicking sand into the firepit, smothering its small flames. He refilled Tommy's cup then poured the dregs of the pot over the smoking remains of the fire. "As soon as you've finished your breakfast, we ride."

Tommy ate in silence. Avram stopped his packing, and the Texan recognized the familiar words forming on the Rabbi's lips, he mimicked them soundlessly.

"I don't ride today."

Reaching for his saddlebags, Cord paused."What?!"

Tommy choked at the surprise that corssed the gunman's features. Had his own features been as expressive the first time he'd heard those words? Yes, likely, he reasoned, with a hangin' posse on his tail.

"I don't ride on Saturdays. It's our Sabbath."

"You knew about this." Cord turned to the Texan. "Any reason you can't ride? Or, are you Jewish, too, now?"

Tommy's innocent smile broadened. "Jewish? Me? Well, now that is a thought." He took another bite from the hardtack. "No," he glanced again at Avram, "but ain't been from the lack of exposure. Guess I just ain't good enough to live by the rules."

"Careful, Lillard," Cord warned. "You'll have me believin' you're an honest man."

"Honest? No, guess I can't lay claim to that monaker either," he met the strange unreadable eyes and held them with his own hazel-eyed gaze, "but I ain't no liar, Cord. I didn't steal that bay...or the payroll. And I didn't kill the army man or.." the anger leaped into the gunman's eyes, "..your friend."

"Then <u>who</u> did you kill, Friend?" The deep voice had the edge of death to it, Tommy feared he had pushed too hard...too fast."

"I killed the man you want. In Angel's Camp, four nights ago. I was waitin' for Avram to complete his circuit of the northern camps. I got into a poker game with the Jasper. He was drinkin' heavy and playin' like a fool. He dropped alot of money...greenbacks, probably part of that payroll. He got nasty when he lost the bay to me. Accused me of cheatin'...then went for his gun..."

"And you beat him to the draw." Cord finished, his voice heavy with disbelief.

"Yeah! Yeah, I did." Tommy flared seeing the disaproval reflected in the Rabbi's eyes. "He didn't give me any choice!" He defended hotly.

"He was drunk." Avram repeated.

"Yeah, he was drunk and he made the mistake of drawing his gun." Lillard defended, "and if I hadn't shot him, he likely would have made the mistake of <u>killin'</u> me!"

"Nice story, Lillard, but I don't buy it. It's too pat."

Tommy sighed and poured out the remains of his coffee. He had played a fool's hand, he thought, with nothing showing. He had been called. There was nothing left for him to do but fold. He glanced at Avram. The Rabbi's gentle blue eyes were filled with sadness. He groaned. It was possible his friend, his very best friend, didn't believe him either.

Something moving out of the corner of his eye caught Tommy's attention. He glanced toward the gunslinger. Instinctively, his hand moved toward the holstered gun on his hip.

The .44 materialized in Cord's hand, the hammer strained back to full cock.

Tommy hesitated.

"Nice try, Lillard, but you're gonna have to move faster than that."

"Cord, stand real still." Cold sweat broke out on the Texan's face as he looked past the gunman. There's a rattler coiled just behind your right boot." He wet nervous lips. The reptile tightened its coils. "You move an inch, he'll strike."

Cord smiled, his finger easy on the hammer of the deadily .44. "And you were gonna shoot it...save my life." The finger tightened. "I've ssen more rattlers in my country than you can imagine, Friend. If he's gonna strike he would have sounded."

"Then you'd know that a snake shedin' his skin is nasty...half blind--and not likely to rattle any warning' at all." Tommy hissed, "Damn it, Man, he's coiled..and he's nervous. He'll likely give you everything he's got!"

"Rabbi?" Cord snapped.

"He can't see it!" Tommy swore in helpless frustration. "It's blocked by your body. If he moves, it could feel the vibration and strike." Tommy's hand moved again for his gun. "Shoot me...or trust me..."

Sweat broke out on the gunman's upper lip but his gunhand remained steady. "If I think you're the man who shot the paymaster and wounded McGuire, I have to believe that if you draw that Colt it'll be to kill me."

The snake rose on its coils.

"Cord, I don't want to die! Jesus, Man, I don't want to stand here and watch <u>you</u> die!"

Still the half-blinded snake refused to sound a warning, but, as if sensing the fear and tention in the air about it, it rose higher in full striking position.

"He's gonna strike!"

Swearing in fear, Tommy drew his Colt as Cord spun and fired. Two guns roared as one. The body of the huge rattler separated from its head, its bared fangs sank deep into the calf of the gunman's leg above the boot top.

Cord reached down and pulled the mutilated snake from him, blood welling from the punture wounds made by the fangs. He wne to his knees in pain, then turned the .44 back to cover the advancing Texan. "Toss the Colt to me."

Tommy still shaken, spun on the injured gunman. "You give me the peenoodles! I could have killed you just now! And, if you don't take care of that bite, you could be dead this time tomorrow!"

The .44's hammer strained to full-cock and the gray-green eyes flickered with doubt and distrust. "There's been...only one man...I'd trust like that. He's dead. You killed him..."

Tommy released the hammer of his Colt and flung it at Cord's feet. "You are one damned, stubborn man!"

He knelt beside the gunman and angrily ripped the pantleg upward to expose the discolored markings of the snake bite. "Avram, get something out of our pack...a shirt anything you can find. Soak it at the stream..cold! And get it here...quick!" Reaching to his neck, Lillard pulled his neckerchief free and made a wrap around Cord's leg just above the bite and tied it tight. The touraiquet in place he squeezed the wounds, feeling the gunman's leg tighten in pain. Still the huge bore of the .44 continued to follow his every move.

Tommy squeezed again, forcing the wounds to bleed freely. "Damn it, ease up on that hammer! I'm trying to save your life! I can't do what has to be done, thinkin' the pain'll get me killed!"

A moment passed then the thumb eased the hammer to half-cock, but the gunhand remained strangely steady, the muzzle leveled on the Texan.

"Okay, we do it your way." Tommy grunted. "Guess I'm stubborn, too, I can't just sit back and watch you die. Avram, kick that fire to life...quick! Never mind..there's no time. Your knife, Cord. Now!"

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Cord produced the knife and handed it to Lillard.

"Watch that damn hair-trigger," Tommy cautioned, then drove the small bladed knife into and across the fang marks until the blood-welled slowly from the wounds. He leaned over the leg and put his lips to the cuts and sucked. Filling his mouth with blood and venum, he turned his head and spat. He repeated the procedure several times until he was sure he had drawn all the venom he could from the wounds. Only then did he loosen the tourniquet.

"Avram...hurry with that shirt!"

"You've drawn all the venom...you can..." Cord mumbled through clinched teeth. He fell back, spent from the pain and the shock of the sudden blood loss. Still the gun stayed in his clinched fist.

"Something I heard about once. Cold will cut down the pain...and slow the swellin'. You saw the size of that rattler, he carried enough poison to kill a dozen men."

"You'd settle...for one."

"Hell man, can't you get anything through that thick head of yours? If I'd wanted you dead, I wouldn't have warned you. Hell, if you'd trusted me, maybe it wouldn't have happened!"

"And if you hadn't killed for that payroll, I wouldn't have...come after you."

Tommy took the dripping rag from Avram and carefully wrapped it about Cord's calf, holding it in place while Avram pulled off the high-topped boot. The gunman's face was pale, his lips white from the pain and shock of the bite.

"Avram, bring his bedroll and blankets."

"I can walk..."

"No," Tommy snapped. "I've seen my share of snake bites, too, I'm from Texas, remember The men I've known to live through a bad bite were those who stayed quiet and didn't move around. That rattler was a big one, but we got to the bite quick and I bled it good. We've got a cold pack on it and you're down and quiet. Stay that way for a couple of days and you might live long enough to take me back to Arizona...or try."

"I'll take you back." The gunhand wavered then steadied, the man's strange eyes mirroring his pain and growing weakness.

"I'm a damn fool." Tommy mumbled, "flat out of my gord. He plans on havin' me hanged or shot, and I'm sittin' here nursin' him and honeing the damn fool lives to do what he threatens."

Avram Belinsky smiled.

IX

"Get those blankets spread, I'll help you..."

No." Cord's hand tightened about the grip of the .44. "I want you...over by the fire.. where I can keep an eye on you."

"Avram, when you get through there, help him. Try to keep his leg..."

"Lillard, now!"

Tommy spread his arms wide, his hands open. "Okay, okay...don't get excited." He eased backward, hazel eyes intent on the injured man and the deadly weapon he held. Cord made no move to shift onto the bedroll until he had squatted before the cold pit. "Someday, you're gonna have to learn who you can trust." His concerned gaze met and held with the cold, unreadable eyes of the gunman. "You're not always gonna be able to handle everything...alone."

Cord eased gratefully onto his blankets, lying where he could see the firepit and the man who sat beside it. He motioned Avram toward the fire. "Better get some wood for the fire. Lillard, in my bags is a bottle. Get it."

"Please?" Tommy asked curtly.

"Please." Cord snapped, and the .44's hammer strained to full cock.

"You always let that .44 do your talkin' for ya?" Tommy growled. He moved to the gunman's gear and found the partially empty whiskey bottle.

"I have fewer misunderstandings, when I do." Cord fenced, "and no arguements."

Tommy cocked his head to one side, his crooked smile touching a sparkle of mischief in his hazel eyes. "Bet you don't." He stepped toward the man the bottle held at the neck with his right hand.

"Stop right there."

Tommy stopped just out of reach, only steps from the prone man.

"Toss it to me...gently." Cord's voice hardened. "A quick move and I shoot. A glass bottle won't stop a .44 slug--you will."

Tommy gently tossed the bottle. Cord caught it left-handed, his eyes never leaving the standing Texan.

"Very good. Now get a fire started. We'll stay here today. Get an early start in the morning."

"Man, you're crazy!"

"Everyone's entitled to his own opinion," Cord replied, "but gently, my friend, gently I'm in no mood for arguments."

Reading the pain in the gunman's drawn features, Tommy swore. "Cord, you're hurtin'. You get up...start movin' around too soon and that poison could spread."

The knuckles whitened about the .44, "We'll see, hombre. You may find I'm harder to kill..than two men with their backs to you."

Tommy stiffened, Cord's words a verbal slap in the face. "You..think I'm a...backshooter!" Hazel eyes snapping with wounded indignation, the Texan took a step forward.

"Hold it right there, Lillard. Not another step."

"You'd shoot me down? Here? Unarmed? That would make you no better than the man you're after.." Tommy's voice softened with barely contained anger, "the man you think I am."

The .44 roared and a bullet hit the ground in front of the Texan's left boot.

"Another step and I'll take a leg out from under you." There was cold purpose in the man's words.

Hazel eyes met and held with gray-green ones. Silence fell between the two men.

Drawing a deep breath, Tommy stopped. "I'm sorry it has to be this way. Another time--another place--I think we could have been friends." He turned, ignoring the deadly .44 and walked unhurried back to the firepit. Silently, he set about re-building the dead fire.

Cord watched the Texan closely for several moments then eased the hammer on the .44 and lay back against the ground. He set the bottle down and struggled one-handed with the cork, his hand shaking from the effort. The cork popped.

"I don't think that stuff's good mixin' with snake venom," Tommy cautioned without turning from the fire.

Cord's hand hesitated, the bottle half way to his lips. "Keep hopein',Lillard, maybe it'll kill me." He put the bottle to his mouth and took a healthy swing, then another, before he put it down. He fumbled with the cork, then pushed the bottle away, his stomach revolting against the liquor. He coughed. Swallowing hard, he tried to force down the bile that rose in his throat.

"Tommy?" Avram's gentle eyes were filled with concern as he watched the gunman lean away from his blankets and retch again and again.

"I know, Cuz," Tommy whispered, the same concern and pain reflecting in his own eyes, but he kept his gaze averted from the sick gunman. "I know."

"Can't we..."

"Avram, the man doesn't <u>want</u> our help!"

"What kind of a reason is that?"

"The kind that keeps me from trying to breath through a hole in my gut---.44 caliber size!"

Avram glanced from his friend to the man in the blankets. Cord lay on his back, his features pale, pinched with the pain of his illness.

"Is there nothing we can do?" Avram looked helplessly back at his friend.

Tommy sighed and urged the struggling flames to life, feeding pieces of deadwood into it slowly. "No."

"We could get the gun away from him. He's sick. It should be easy...then we can help him."

Tommy chuckled. "Yeah, 'bout as easy as takin' rattles from a rattler with your bare hands. If you look real close, Cuz, you'll see he's still holdin' that .44 and his finger's still on the damn hammer."

Avram glanced again at the quiet figure.

"Take it easy," Tommy growled, "ain't nothing we can do now, if he'd let us...later," he shrugged. "We'll see."

* * *

Long into the night, well after Avram had rolled into his blankets and the gunman had gotten quiet, Tommy sat before the firepit nursing a hot cup of coffee, their last, while he contemplated his problems, his emotions were torn between wanting to get himself and Avram as far away from the gunslinger as possible and the nagging suspection that, if offered the opportunity, he probably would not be able to leave the injuried man alone. Even now, he glanced toward the silent blankets, he found himself feeling compassion for the man, sensing the pain of Cord's loss more than he would have before meeting Avram.

Friendship was something he had always told himself he didn't need. It carried responsibilities he had always shied away; vulnerabilities that he had told himself he couldn't chance. All day, as he and Avram had watched Cord struggle with his illness while attempting to maintain control of his two prisoners, Tommy had pondered the depth of his own feelings toward Avram, putting himself in Cord's position. Would he be willing to kill in revenge?

All too readily his mind went back to a darkened San Francisco street and the final confrontation between Avram and Matthew Diggs. What if he hadn't regained consciousness in time? What if Matt Diggs had pushed Avram into drawing against him, killing him? Tommy shifted uneasily, his jawline stiffening with the determination of his convictions. Yes, he admitted, if Diggs had killed Avram, he would have followed the man to the ends of the earth with the intention of doing just what Cord wanted to do.. kill.

Okay, he could understand the man's drives..his motivations..even his right to avenge the death of a friend. But he had the wrong man! And,Tommy doubted, he was any closer to making Cord believe that then he'd been the day before.

He drained his cup, and got wearily to his feet. He would look in on the gunman, check his leg, then get some sleep. Perhaps in the morning, with daylight brightening the world of the California wilderness, his own future would look brighter, too.

* * *

"Tommy, how is...?"

The Texan turned to greet the Rabbi who stumbled from his blankets, his eyes still heavy with sleep. "He's find, Cuz. Come on over and get some of this hardtack, and there's a few beans left..."

Avram Belinsky knelt before the fire accepting the plate extended toward him, then glanced toward the quiet figure in the blankets across from them. He could see no movement. "Are you sure?"

Tommy frowned. "Yeah, I 'm sure. I don't think he closed his eyes all night. Whatever sleep he got, he got with that damned .44 cocked in his fist."

Avram glanced again toward the blankets then at his plate. "Has he eaten?"

"I'll offer him something when we're finished here..."

"I'll do it." Avram got to his feet and walked toward Cord's bedroll.

In the silence of early morning, the sound of the heavy .44 being cocked was loud to the Texan. He stood up warily, conscious of words passing between the two men although he could not make them out. Avram returned to the fire.

"He wants nothing," Avram stated simply, his blue eyes filled with concerned sadness. "He must eat andhe's still in alot of pain..."

"Cuz, it's better if he don't eat much right now. If he'll take water that's all he really needs for awhile..."

"But Tommy, he needs help..."

"He had help," Tommy snapped. "More than he deserves..more than he's given me!" Reading the despair in Avram's eyes, he sighed. "Sorry, Cuz. Look, don't worry. Any man who can take a strike like that and stay awake all night with a cocked .44 in his fist, fightin' off the chills and fever of the poison, is too damned tough to die. He'll make it."

"If we could get a doctor..."

Tommy stiffened. "What did you say?"

"A doctor," Avram repeated, "I said if we..."

"Yeah, yeah," Tommy poked absently at the flames, his handsome features drawn in thought. "If I figure right we're only a hard hour's ride or so from at least a couple of new camps that's sprung up in these parts. Cord's been careful to stay off the main trails, but I know this country pretty well..."

A look of hope crossed the Rabbi's expressive features. "Then we can get help?"

The Texan shook his head. "Ain't gonna be no sawbones in any of these camps..." He rubbed thoughtfully at the stubble on his jaw. " Sides a doc can't do no more for him than we've done. I was thinkin'..." he paused, watching the hope die in his friend's eyes. "We could get the supplies we're runnin' low on. I'm gettin' damn tired of hard-tack and he could use some decent grub once he starts recoverin' from that venom. We had enough to get us to the coast when we left Angel's Camp. With other camps along the way, I didn't expect to need more. We've about used what we had, and Cord was low when he ran into us."

Avram glanced again toward the reclining gunman. "Can't we find anything to help him?"

"Best help we can give him is givin' him no reason to shoot us. He's hurtin' but there's been no other symtoms. He'll make it."

"But he'll never let us leave. He'll think..."

"Not me," Tommy grinned. "You."

"He?"

"Sure."

"But," Avram glanced about the peaceful camp, "what if I can't find this camp?"

"That could be a problem," Lillard agreed, for a moment humor touched his eyes. "We can't have you gettin' lost."

"If you give me directions,perhaps..."

Hesitation, mingled with willingness to help, pulled the Texan's lips into the crooked smile at the Rabbi's words. "You won't get lost, Pard. You ain't ridden this far with me, not to have learned a thing or two."

"I will...try."

"Ain't no problem, if you can foller this stream up to the next camp you ain't gonna have no problem followin' it back down to us."

"That's all?" Avram glanced toward the sounds of the stream beside which they had camped. "Which way is up?"

Tommy chuckled. "Opposite of down. Never mind." He stilled Avram's protest. "The problem now is to clear it with Cord. Stay here...and let me do the talkin'."

The Texan got slowly to his feet, moved to his saddle and secured an empty cup then returned to the fire, all the while conscious of the gunman's eyes following his ever

movement. From the freshly filled canteen, he poured the cup full of clear, cold spring water, keeping his hands on the cup, he moved toward the reclining man.

The muzzle of the .44 followed him.

He stopped just short of the blankets. "This water'll do you more good than that rot-gut whiskey."

"If I'd wanted water...I'd have...asked for it..."

Tommy's lips pulled to a thin line with anger. "Then let's pretend you did." He sat the cup down within reach of the injured gunman, and took a step back.

"I've been through our supplies, we're gettin' damned low. If we stay here for a couple of days we're gonna need some things..."

"We'll get...by."

"There's camps all up and down the river," Tommy continued, ignoring the man's words. "A man could be there and back in half a day."

"And you would be more than willin' to go..." Cord paused his teeth clamping down on his lips as he tried to talk past the pain. "For..get...it."

"Not me, damn it! The Rabbi." Tommy drew a deep breath, "He could ride in and out without being noticed. No one will question another foreigner in the fields... they're everywhere. 'Sides he might be able to get something to help you..."

"No..."

"Damn it, what have you got to lose?" Tommy argued. "You afraid he won't come back? Hell, you didn't want him along in the first place. With you down, it'll be one man less to watch."

The strange eyes reflected pain, but Tommy could read nothing else in them. "You're afraid he'll bring back help," Tommy guessed. Something flickered behind the eyes. "Hell, these are gold camps, man! Ain't nobody got time to listen to another man's troubles, and they sure in hell ain't gonna worry themselves 'bout my situation."

"They'd worry plenty...about $10,000. in Army...greenbacks. If your friend offered 'em...a cut."

"Jesus, Man, Avram may be green as these hills, but he ain't crazy! Even hinting at that payroll would only get the three of us killed. Dead by that .44 of yours or a slug in the back by some worthless camp bum...is still dead! Tommy's voice softened, "I'd like to see the three of us stay alive."

Gray-green, suspicious eyes held to seriously worried hazel ones in steady contemplation. Sweat beaded on the pale forehead of the gunman as he struggled with his decision "Belinsky. Come here."

Avram moved cautiously to the side of his friend.

"You heard what's been said?"

"Yes." Avram articulated carefully.

"You know what we need?"

"Yes."

"You get what we have to have...talk to no one...make no other stops. Get back here... quick."

Avram nodded his agreement. He shifted a worried glance from one man to the other.

"Here..."

Avram caught the leather thong that Cord tossed to him. "Tie Lillard's hands behind his back. Tight!"

Lillard stiffened. "If I'm tied, I can't help you if you need..."

"Tie him!" Cord cut Tommy's protest short. "If he goes for those supplies..we do it my way."

Avram stood fingering the leather nervously, the tension between the two men almost palpable. "Tommy?"

"Do what he says."

"Turn your back to us, Lillard. I want to see those knots tied."

Tommy turned slowly, crossing his wrists behind his back.

"Go ahead, Rabbi, remember I'm watching."

Avram bound Tommy's wrists tightly together under Cord's watchful eyes.

"Good." The .44 wavered. He eased back spent from his efforts and the after affects of the whiskey on his uneasy stomach. "Saddle up and get going."

Avram glanced helplessly at the bound Texan. "Tommy..."

"I'm all right," Tommy lied, already feeling the numbness of poor circulation creeping into his hands. "Sooner you get there...sooner you get back. You be careful... you hear?"

Avram nodded.

"There's a tent town down stream 'bout 5-6 miles," Cord groaned, then reached for the cup of water and drained it. "I rode through there couple of days ago...place called Helltown...supply tent east side."

Avram glanced again at the uncomfortable Texan.

"Cuz, get going. I don't plan on spending any more time than I have to like this."

Avram turned, hurrying to his saddle, he picked it up, shouldered it, and moved swiftly to the picketed chestnut.

X.

The black-frocked figure paused in the doorway of the flimsy lean-to that served as a store, glanced carefully up and down the dusty thoroughfare before cautiously easing out a canvas bag. He moved to the hitch-rail and the chestnut gelding. He set the bag down, struggled furtively with the ties on the saddle bags. In all his eagerness to go unobserved, he was watched by two men who lounged in half-drunken boldness outside the small tent that proclaimed itself 'Hell Town"s largest Waterin' Hole'.

"Hank that there stranger sure looks to be in apowerful hurry." The taller of the two commented loud enough to carry to the man at the side of the chestnut. "Where ya suppose he's bound for?"

"Maybe got his'self a claim-tryin' to keep it secret--like--sneakin' in here mid-day for supplies--so's no one will see 'em."

"Stranger to me--"

"Nother damn foreigner--comin' in here-thinin' they'se good as anyone--come take gold from hard-workin' 'mericans."

The two men moved away from the tent and toward the black-frocked man who continued to pack his provisions carefully into the empty bags.

"Damned good lookin' chestnut--too good for the likes of 'em--" the man called Hank commented begruginly.

Avram reached down and pulled a small bag of flour from the canvas bag and the muffled clink of bottles from within brought the two men closer. He closed the bag, hurriedly shoving the flour into the saddlebags.

"Zeke, I heared bottles. What ya s'pose 'es got in that there bag--"

"What ya say we look see," Hank touched the bag with the toe of his boot, again a clink of bottles was heard.

Avram stiffened. He turned slowly to face his two antagonists.

Hank opened the bag and lifted out a small, green, strangely labeled bottle, holding it up where he study the words written on the small container.

"What's it say, Hank?"

Hank giggled drunkedly. "Don't know--can't read. What you say we give it a sample--"

"No!" Avram stepped forward, reaching for the bottle that was suddenly pulled from his reach.

"Well now, Zeke, the ferigner don't want to share. Must be good stuff, ya think?"

"Please--" Avram sighed as Hank tossed the bottle awkwardly toward his friend, who barely managed to catch the small container. "It's for snake bite. Please, you do not want to drink it--"

Zeke frowned at the wording on the small bottle. "Snake bite? Our snakes got better sense than goin' round bitin' ferigners--"

Hank laughed. He caught the bottle that was again tossed to him, just out of Avram's reaching hand. "You don't need this, stranger. You'd more likely get lead poisonin' then snake bite here 'bouts. We'll just take this off your hands for ya--"

"Please," Avram articulated patiently. "I must have it. A friend of mine has been bitten, it's for him."

"Hear that Zeke, this here ferigner's got a friend--"

"Hard to believe, ain't it?"

Avram reached into the bag and pulled out a full bottle of Kentucky bourbon. The joking subsided as both men looked longingly at the familiar bottle.

"Ah, now that's real smooth drinkin'--" Hank reached for the bottle which Avram quickly pulled out of his reach. "Give me the medicine--then you can have this."

The two men stiffened, all humor leaving their countenances.

"Hear that, Zeke, the ferigner here's callin' the shots--like he thinks he's something we ought to listen to."

Zeke took a step toward the Rabbi.

Avram quickly backed away, still holding the whiskey bottle out of their reach. He stopped when he backed into the chestnut. Cornered.

"Hand it over, Stranger. And, maybe, we won't pull that funny beard of yours."

Avram groaned, all too conscious of the fact that he was about to become the center of Hell Town's recreational program for the day. Several men appeared in the opening of the saloon tent watching the confrontation eagerly. He searched the faces for some sympathy. He could read nothing in the many be-whiskered faced miners who watched witout sign of entering into the argument. He straightened in determination.

"I must have the bottle," he repeated. "My friend is in pain and in need of it. The whiskey, he doesn't need. That you can have."

Zeke eyed his partner in blurry-eyed speculation. "Hank, give him the bottle. That's free whiskey he's offerin'."

Hank slowly shook his head. "It ain't gonna be that easy. Stranger, you want this here med-E-sine you're gonna have to take it...fists, guns or knives, take your pick."

"I have no knife." Avram voiced wearily. "And I carry no gun."

"You got fists."

"Yes..."

"Then use 'em."

Without warning, Hank struck out with a vicious, but drunk-slowed punch.

Avram stepped easily aside, and the momentum of the swing took Zeke to the ground at the Rabbi's feet.

A roar of laughter from behind him, brought the man to his feet in red-faced anger. He moved toward the uneasy Pole. "That's it," he hissed. "Ain't no feringer gonna make a laughin' stock a me."

Avram narrowly avoided the next swing, but unable to move away from the hitchrail and the tied chestnut was forced to put his back to Hank who shoved him brutally into Zeke's next swing. He took the savage blow on the jaw, stumbled into the chestnut who moved nervously away. He fell.

Avram got slowly to his feet, touching his jaw tenderly. "I only want what is mine, then I will leave."

The bottle of bourbon was quickly retrieved from under the chestnut's nervous feet by Zeke who watched his partner with eager anticipation.

"Sure, you can leave," Hank smiled. "I'll even give you the bottle here, for your sick friend--"

Avram, surprised, took the offered bottle. Carefully checked the seal, he looked up at the two men. "Thank you."

"Sure."

Avram turned to the chestnut.

"You can leave," Hank repeated, "shank's mare. I've decided that horse is too good for the likes of you. Here," he reached into his pocket and tossed a two-bit piece toward Avram. "I've just bought him off ya."

Silence fell over the street as the piece of silver rolled to a stop next to Avram's boot. The Rabbi stared in disbelief at the man before him. "The horse is not for sale."

"Pick it up, Jew boy."

Avram turned his back. Untying the gelding, still holding tight to the small, important container, he mumbled firmly, "No. The money is not mine--the horse is."

"I said pick it up."

"We hang horse thieves in these parts, Amigo."

Hank turned at the softly voiced statement, glaring at the man who stood at the edge of the crow, his back to the saloon tent, a smoke dangling from his lips.

He was a tall man dressed in well-worn buckskins, liberally adorned with flashing, silver conchoes, a wide-brimed sombrero was pushed back from the sun-browned features of a round, handsome face.

"And, we shoot greasers who damned well don't mind their own business." Hank swore in drunken bravado, his hand moving slowly toward the belted weapon at his waist.

"Hank--go slow--" Zeke warned, sober enough to notice the professional slant of the belted colt revolver that rode the Mexican's hip.

Hank laughed. It was not a pleasant sound. He turned away from the soft-spoken Mexican. "Wait your turn, Greaser. Never was a day I couldn't handle a Jew-boy and a Mex with one hand tied behind my back."

"Hank! Let's take the whiskey and go find us a woman, they ain't worth--"

"Shut up, Zeke, I ain't backin' down from the likes of'im," his hand crept closer to his belted weapon. "I said move away from that horse. Now!"

Avram stood still, the reins of the chestnut in his hand. He glanced from first one man then the other. "No."

Hank's hand encircled the butt of his gun; he met the gentle, but firm resolution in the Rabbi's expressive eyes.

"If that gun clears leather, hombre, you're buyin' trouble."

Hank swore at the soft drawl of the Mexican, the Colt revolver clearing leather as he spun on his heel. Before he could level the .45, two shots rang out; one hitting the ground in front of him, the other tugging savagely at the sleeve of his gunarm. Hank froze.

"I think, Amigo, it would be a good idea if you dropped the gun--before it gets you killed."

Hank glanced quickly at his partner who stood with his hands carefully away from his gun. "Zeke--we can take 'em!"

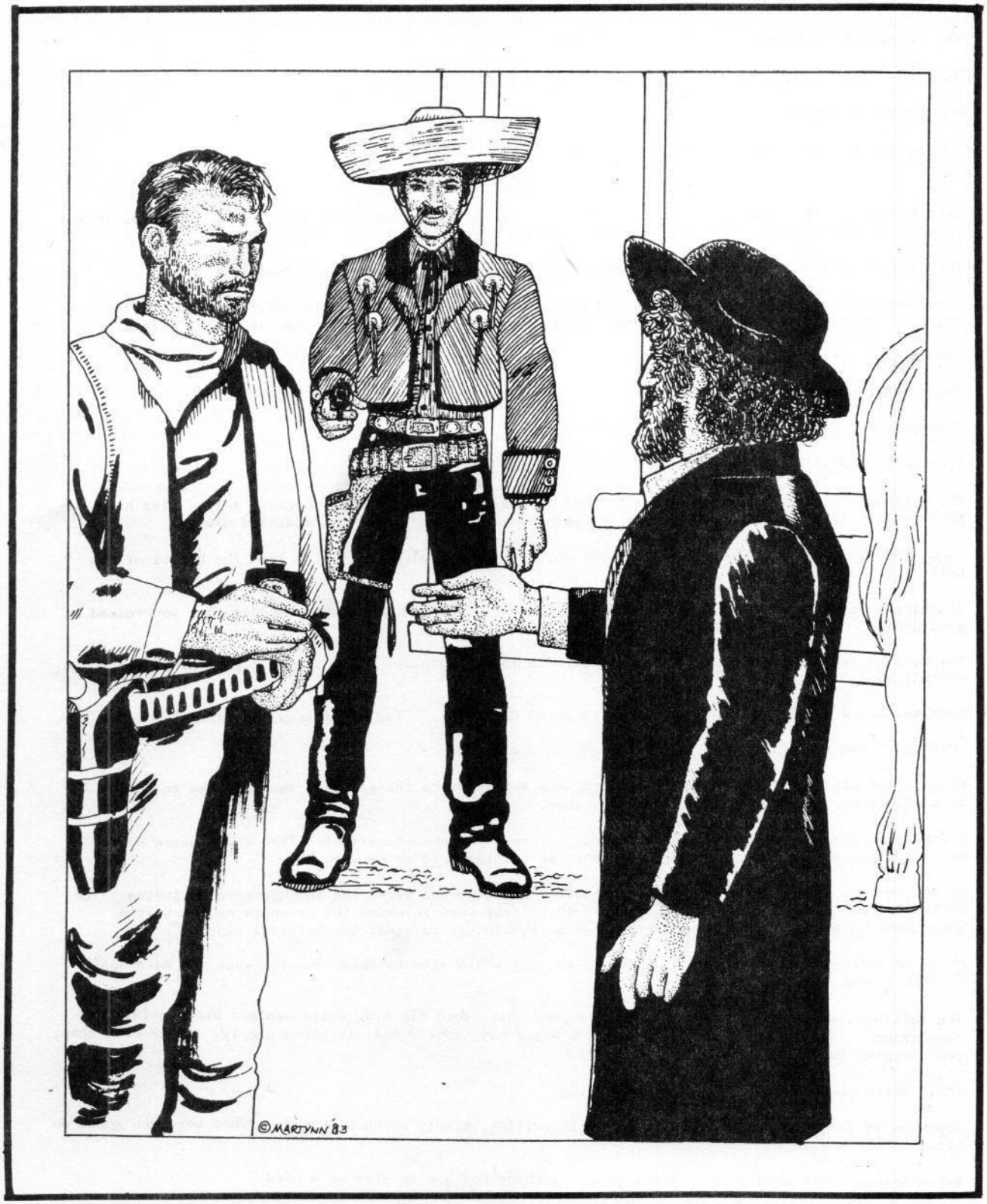
Zeke wet dry lips, taking a cautious step backwards. "No, not me, friend. I ain't got no arguments with you."

The Mexican shrugged wide shoulders, the Colt easy in his hand. He turned back to the miner. "It would seem, Amigo, you are on your own. Would you like to drop that gun--now. I have not had to shoot a man for several days--I would hate to dirty my reputation with the likes of you."

Futility, glancing about the silent crowd, Hank swore in murderous anger, no longer drunk enough to push his luck with the unknown qualities of the strange Mexican. "This ain't over, Mex, you and me'll meet again--then we'll see--"

The lazy smile broadened. "Any time, Gringo, any time. Now," his voice hardened and strangely cold, gray eyes settled on the miner, "drop the gun."

The Colt revolver fell from Hank's hand. He took a reluctant step away from it.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"I want the two of you to get your horses and ride out."

"What the hell?!" Hank swore. "We ain't plannin' on leavin'!"

"You are now." The Mexican stated firmly.

"Our horses are tied at the livery," Zeke said.

"Get 'em. Your nasty tempered friend will wait here with me."

Zeke turned to leave.

"Amigo, the bottle. Return it to its rightful owner. Carefully."

Zeke hesitated, then handing the bottle to Avram, he hurried toward the livery which consisted of a roughly thrown together correl with several saddled horses tied to its flimsy posts.

The Mexican waited at ease, his eyes never straying from the unarmed man before him.

Zeke, mounting one of the horses, leading another by its reins, rode cautiously up to the tall Mexican. Pulling the bay to a halt, he handed the reins of a raw-boned buckskin to his friend.

"Mount up," the Mexican ordered softly.

"What about my gun?"

"Leave it."

"The hell, I will!"

The Mexican's finger tightened on the trigger of his Colt. The big gun roared. A lead slug hit the revolver lying in the sand sending it spinning crazily away from the startled miner.

"Now, you can have it," the Mexican drawled softly. Smoke spirelled lazily from the barrel of his Colt.

Reaching down, Hank retrieved the weapon then flung it from him in anger. "Goddamn it, you ruined a good gun!"

The Mexican made no comment. He held his Colt in lazy readiness. "Now it won't get you killed. Get movin', rápido!"

Hank turned, stepped into his saddle and gathered his reins. "You ain't seen the last of me, Mex."

"Perhaps," the man shrugged. "We shall see. Now ride!"

Hank pulled cruelly at the buckskin's mouth, and set spurs to the gelding, leaving Zeke to follow at a slow trot. The two men headed out of town.

The Mexican stepped away from the saloon and motioned the onlookers away. "The excitements over." Why don't you return to your drinkin'. There is nothing more to be seen."

At the ominous wave of the Colt, the men hastily broke up the gathering and disappeared inside. The Mexican waited until the last man moved off the street then released the pressure on the Colt's hammer and holstered it. "I would give them a few minutes to clear out before I ride."

Avram Belinsky drew a deep breath, then smiled. "I would like to thank you for what you have done. I think--I was in a little trouble."

The tall Mexican threw back his head and laughed, his teeth flashing white against his sun-darkened complexion. "Sí, Amigo, a little trouble, I would say, covers the situation nicely. It is true then, you carry no gun?"

"No," Avram denied softly. "I have no gun."

"Perhaps it is just as well." The man, still smiling, slowly shook his head. "What were you gonna do before I stepped in?"

Avram shrugged his shoulders. "Don't know. I think God had to give me a hand."

"In Hell Town?" The Mexican laughed. "I ain't too sure he knows about this place--yet."

Avram's gentle blue eyes softened. "Yes, He knows. He sent you, didn't He?"

"[illegible]!" [illegible] then grew serious as he read the look in Avram's eyes. "Sí, Amigo, perhaps he did. If he has sent me on a trail to stop one killing--perhaps he also sent me to stop two. I am glad I was able to assist you, Señior."

"My name is Belinsky--Avram Belinsky." The Rabbi extended his hand. It was grasped in friendly greeting by the tall Mexican.

"I am pleased, Amigo. I am Jose Emanuel Jock Diego McGuire, at your service." The Mexican swept the huge sombrero from his head and bowed low before the amazed Pole, then stood tall, replacing the huge hat.

"All that--is your name?!"

The man laughed. "Sí. A mouthful, no?"

"No--yes!" Avram remarked chuckling, the carefree humor of the tall man contagious. "Why so many names?"

"It's a long complicated, very boring story, my friend. It is the ways of my mother's people to name their children after departed loved ones. My father, not to be out done, added a few of his own. Being the only child of two such people, I inherited them all."

Avram nodded absently. "But what shall I call you?"

"Take your pick. My friends call me Pico."

"And my friend call me--well many things--" Avram stammered, "mostly he calls me, Cuz."

Pico smiled. "I think, until I know you at least as well as he, I will call you Avram"

"Good," Avram grinned happily. "That is good." A sudden thought sobered him. He tightened his grip on his reins. "I must go."

"It is true, then, your friend was bitten? A rattler?"

"Yesterday morning--"

Pico slowly shook his head. "That stuff you were willin' to fight for won't help him, my friend. If you cut the bite and sucked out the venom--"

"Yes, yes," Avram assured him, "that was done as soon as he was bitten."

"Then he has a far better chance on his own than that Injun juice will give 'im." McGuire laid a concerned hand on Avram's shoulder. "Do not worry, Amigo, I'm sure you will find your friend much improved when you return to him."

Avram fell silent as he contemplated his new friend's words carefully. "This is true? But he was in pain when I left. He tried to take a drink and vomited a great deal--"

"Don't worry, Amigo. If he was well enough to get to a bottle, he won't die of snake bite."

"Thank you." Avram turned again, put his foot to the stirrup and pulled himself into the saddle. "I must get back. I did not mean to be gone so long."

"You ride a wide trail, my friend. I don't think those two will give you any more trouble, but be on the lookout."

"Yes, I will be careful." Avram hesitated, his blue-eyed gaze locked in puzzlement with the gray eyes of the Mexican.

"Amigo? There is something more?"

"My friend said that your people did not like trouble."

"Sí, it is true," the Mexican agreed, "and I am constantly at war with myself. My Mexican half says find a bottle of good tequila and a fine shade tree, but my Irish side loves a good fight. It is a sad thing. I fear, mi amigo, my Irish side has always been stronger than my Mexican side. It is a problem I shall have to work on."

Avram returned the Mexican-Irish's wide grin. He reined the chestnut away. "If you are ever in San Francisco, please look me up and we can talk about old times--"

"I will remember, Vaya con Dios, Amigo, and much luck to you and your friend."

Good-bye, Pico. Good-bye--and thanks."

An uneasy smile pulled at the Mexican-Irish's mouth as he watched the black-frocked man ride slowly out of town, reining the gelding into the trail toward the river. "Perhaps," he mumbled to himself, "it would be a nice day to ride along the river."

XI.

Tommy sat cross-legged before the dying fire, pulling half-heartedly at his bound wrists trying to force circulation back into his hands and fingers. He swore at his discomfort, and Avram's tardiness, his temper worsening with each passing moment. A movement from his left brought his attention from himself and his problems, to the bedroll and the gunman reclining there. Cord was sitting up.

The gunslinger holstered the .44 he had kept drawn since he had lain down, and worked slowly at uncovering his wound, carefully untying the bandage and removing it to reveal the reddened fang marks and the criss-crossed knife cuts across them.

"That rot-gut you were trying to drink earlier would do some good on that leg now." Tommy commented dryly, trying to keep the concern from his voice.

Cord glanced at him then back at the exposed bite. He reached for the whiskey bottle and uncorked it. Stretching the leg out, he poured a liberal amount of the liquid over the raw wounds. He clinched his teeth against the pain, closing his eyes to the sharp discomfort which momentarily left him breathless. He moaned, fighting the pain long enough to pour still another measure of the liquor over the wounds. He recorked the bottle and laid down, shaken by the experience.

"If you'd untie me I could help you redress that leg."

"I can do--it."

"Sure," Tommy snapped, "you can take on the whole world single-handed! And every man you meet is a personal enemy! Thank God, I don't live in your world, it's too damned lonely."

"I wouldn't--be too worried--'bout my problems, Lillard, you--got enough--of your own."

"You're really somethin', you know that!" Tommy exploded, the last of his controlled temper evaporating under the gunslinger's cold, unreadable gaze. "Goddamn it, Man, you don't believe I killed your friend! You haven't believed it since you turned your gun from me to kill that damn snake! And if you believe I didn't kill your friend, then you <u>have</u> to believe the rest of it--that I <u>did</u> kill the man you want. That's what you can't forgive me for, isn't it?"

Cord made no move to acknowledge he had heard what the Texan had said. His eyes still closed as he rested.

"You ain't takin' me back to hang for killin' your friend. You're takin' me back 'cause I killed the man you <u>wanted</u> to kill."

"No." The word was a whisper, barely reaching the bound man before the fire.

"Damn--" Tommy moaned. "Get that leg covered before it infects!"

For a moment, Cord remained motionless, slowly he sat up.

"There's strips from the shirt I used in the saddlebags--there--beside your bedroll."

Cord found the shirt and tightly bound his leg. He lay back spent from his efforts, his labored breathing loud in the stillness of late afternoon. "Your friend--is overdue."

"Yeah, I know." Tommy mumbled uneasily.

"Give any thought to the possibility he <u>won't</u> be back?"

"No."

"Why should he? Ridin' with you ain't the life for a married man--a sky pilot--"

Tommy bristled noticably. "Stop it! You ain't pushin' me into no goddamn gunfight--not like that."

"You tryin' to tell me you're worried about him?" A brow lifted and a sardonic smile touched the gunman's features.

"Yeah." Tommy snapped the word short. He saw the disbelief on the gunman's face. "What's the use," he mumbled. "You can't seem to realize you ain't the only man on this earth who cares for a friend--" Tommy's voice softened with sincere regret, "I'm sorry your friend died, Cord, you need him--bad."

"Yeah." The acknowledgement was a whisper, but heavy with a pain Tommy had not heard before in the man's deep voice.

"Tommy. Cord. Is everything all right?"

Tommy struggled awkwardly to his feet, as the sound of a heavy body and the shuffle of horse's hooves broke the silence that had grown heavy between himself and Cord. "Avram? That you, Cuz?"

"Yes, yes." The horse broke into the clearing and stopped before the dead campfire. Avram scrambled awkwardly from the saddle, dropping the horse's reins, ground tying it, while he hurried to his friend's side. He hesitated, then turned to the seated gunman. "Can I untie him?"

"Go ahead. Lillard--"

"I know, I know, I won't try anything. Shee-it, Cuz, I was gettin' damned worried 'bout you. You're all right, ain't ya?"

Avram turned his friend until he could reach his bound hands. "I'm fine. Hold still while I loosen these knots. Why are they so tight? I can hardly work them--free." Avram struggled with the ropes.

"You tied them that tight! I ain't had any feelin' in my fingers for the last hour."

Avram paused. "Tommy--I'm sorry."

"Forget it," Tommy glanced angrily at the silent gunman, "it ain't your fault."

Avram pulled at the final knot and it came free. He stepped away from his friend, who quickly worked the circulation back into his numbed fingers.

"Okay, Cord, what now?"

"You can unpack the supplies. Rabbi, did you get that bourbon I wanted?"

"Yes."

"Bring it here."

"Should he--" Avram questioned hesitantly.

"Sure, what the hell," Tommy swore. "As you can see, he's doing fine. The only way I can figure him recoverin' like that is his poison was stronger than the damn rattler's. Probably didn't have to shoot the varmit, likely it would have died anyway--after bittin' him."

Avram smiled happily. "Then he will not need the medicine I brought--"

"What medicine, Pard?"

Avram turned to his saddlebags, found the hard-fought for bottle and handed it to the Texan.

The cowboy glanced at the strange label, then laughed. "Snake bite elixir! Should have givin' it to the snake!"

Cord got slowly to his feet, loosening the .44 in the cut-away holster, he limped over to Texan and the Rabbi. Seeing the bottle, a touch of a smile pulled at his mouth. "I don't think I'll try that stuff--but the bourbon should go down real smooth."

"So would food," Tommy snapped. "You'll put a drunk on real quick with that on an empty stomach."

"I can handle it."

"Avram, unsaddle the horse while I throw something together. Cord can make a meal of that bottle if he wants, for me some good, solid food--and a hot cup coffee. You did remember the coffee, didn't you?"

"Yes." Avram handed the stuffed bags to his friend, then led the horse toward the picketline. "While you cook, I will water the horses."

Tommy nodded, already working feeble life back into the white coals deep in the fire's ashes. "You'd better get off that leg."

Cord stood behind the Texan for another moment, the bourbon bottle in his hand unopened. Without comment, he returned to his blankets and sat down. Leaning against his saddle, he watched Tommy, the bottle untouched beside him.

Tommy turned away from the fire, reaching for the dry kindling, feeding it slowly to the awakening fire. Rocking back on his heels, he coaxed life into the struggling flames. Reaching for another, larger branch, he hesitated. His head cocked toward the river, he listened.

"Cord. Horses--at the river--"

The gunslinger rolled swiftly into his blankets until only the top of his head showed on the seat of his saddle.

"A gun--shee-it, Man!"

The dark head motioned the Texan to silence.

Lillard got slowly to his feet, bringing his hand down until it brushed the empty holster at his hip. He swore at his helplessness.

Laughter. Unfamiliar. Threatening. Avram?

Tommy took a step forward, then stopped. Avram stepped awkwardly into the clearing, stumbled and was shoved brutally to the ground at the Texan's feet.

"Hold it right there, Cowboy, another step and I'll blow you and the Jew to kingdom come."

Tommy stiffened, but stood quiet under the muzzle of the rifle in the hands of a tall, roughly dressed individual with cold, unemotional eyes. Another man stood beside him,, a drawn revolver trained on them. "What do you want?"

"A little satisfaction from the Jewboy, here," the man with the rifle stated coldly, "your horses--guns, anything else of value you got." He chuckled softly. "If you give us your full cooperation, we might not kill you."

"Hank, there's someone in that bedroll. You there! Get up--real slow--"

"He can't," Tommy snapped, pulling the rifleman's attention away from the quiet figure in the blankets. "He's hurt. Rattler bit him."

"Zeke! Check the blankets. I'll watch these two."

Tommy felt his muscles twitch with taut readiness. They would have only one chance. He didn't know what Cord had planned, but he had a pretty good idea what would ahppen to <u>any</u> man foolish enough to face Cord with a drawn gun in his hand.

Zeke stopped beside the blankets, the muzzle of his Colt trained on the motionless form. "Hey, you," he prodded the form not ungently with the toe of his boot. There was no sign of movement, only a groan issued from the blankets. The muzzle of the Colt dropped, and the boot prodded harder. "I said get up. Now!" He reached down and grabbed the edge of the blanket and pulled.

The blanket came away and the roar of the big .44 exploded in the silence of surprise. The miner dropped his Colt, clinching wildly at his chest, then pitched forward--dead.

The gunslinger, rolling as he fired, gained his feet in one swift, graceful movement, the smoking .44 cocked and moving toward the two men who struggled across the fire from him.

Tommy kicked out viciously as the familiar roar of the .44 sounded behind him. The rifle, wrenched savagely from the surprised miner's hand, exploded harmlessly into the air, then fell, spinning out of the man's reach. Tommy swung a left-cross to the man's face, then moved in with a hard body blow. A short chop to the stunned man's exposed jaw, and Hank went down, falling over Avram Belinsky who sat stunned by the swift turn of events.

Tommy reached for the rifle.

'Belinsky, get the hell out of there! Lillard, look out!"

Tommy, half way to his feet, whirled, his eyes wide with the realization of his danger. A fully-cocked revolver wavered in the downed man's hand, coming to bear on him.

The heavy .44 roared again, the sting of its passing pulling savagely at Lillard's shirt as it passed under his arm, taking the miner high in the left side, throwing him backwards as his finger tightened on the trigger of the Colt. The gun exploded, the lead slug whinning past Tommy's ear as the Texan threw himself flat, pulling the surprised Rabbi to the ground with him.

The miner rolled to his side and lay still. His eyes open to a scenario he no longer saw.

Tommy struggled to his feet, shaken from the nearness of death and a growing anger. He wrenched the Colt from the miner's fingers then whirled to face the man who stood in a wide-legged stance before him, the smoking .44 easy in his hand, his dark eyes untroubled by the death around him.

"Goddamn it! You like to shot me!" Tommy touched the powder-burned shirt along his ribs.

"You'd rather be dead?" Cord asked. "He carried a beltgun--to the left side--for a cross-draw. His vest hid the butt, but the barrel showed--if you'd bothered to look."

"What about them?" Tommy glanced at the two still forms.

"Forget 'em. They're dead."

Avram got to his feet, moving quickly from first one downed man to the other. Sadly he verified Cord's words. He closed their eyes. "Why?" he whispered, "why must so many die?"

Tommy drew a deep breath, "You answer him, Cord."

Cord stiffened, reading the accusation in the Texan's eyes, and the sadness in the eyes of the Rabbi.

"How many graves are there on your back trail, Cord?" Tommy accused softly.

"Any man pulls a gun--takes his chances," Cord defended. "I didn't make the goddamn rules, Lillard. But if I don't live by them--I'll sure in hell die by them."

"And every goddamn man that draws a gun doesn't have to be killed! Not when a man's as good with a gun as you are!" Tommy swore. "They were camp bullies. You could have wounded the first! The second, once he saw a gun in your hand--would have folded. You know their kind! They're all talk."

"And if something had gone wrong?" Cord asked softly, "like just now? Do you really think he wasn't going to shoot to kill when he pulled that gun on you? If you'd had a gun in your hand, could you have taken the chance?"

Silence fell over the two men, Avram standing quietly to one side momentarily forgotten.

"No."

The two men turned to face the softly spoken Rabbi.

"He would have killed Tommy. And, after they had what they wanted--they would have killed us."

"Yeah," Tommy whispered softly, "you're right--they would have killed us." He looked down at the Colt revolver in his hand.

"What are you gonna do?" There was a weariness in the deep voice of the gunslinger. He stood expectantly before the Texan, the .44 still in his hand.

"I don't know," Tommy answered truthfully.

"Why don't you drop the gun," Cord suggested quietly. "There's been enough killin' here today."

"I can't--not this time."

"You don't have a chance against me, Lillard." There was no boasting in Cord's words, only regretful certainty.

"Yeah," Tommy looked into the gray-green eyes. For a moment, he thought he read remorse in them. He straightened before the tall, unyielding gunman and slowly holstered the strange Colt. "I figure I'll have as good a chance as either of these gents did. At least, I know what--who I'm going up against."

"Do you?" Cord inquired softly. "Don't make any mistakes, my friend. Once that Colt clears leather you're a dead man. Be very sure you know what you're doing."

"Tommy, don't--Cord!"

"Avram stay out of this! This has gone far enough. Damned far enough." Tommy Lillard stood determined before the gunslinger.

"This time I will not stay out of it." Avram stepped between the two men. "Tommy, there <u>has</u> been too much killing here. Cord saved your life." Avram turned helplessly toward the unrelenting gunman. "How can you save him--then shoot him down?"

"It ain't my choice, Rabbi. When he touches that gun, it's his."

"Tommy, do you wish to kill this man?" Avram asked. "To have his blood on your hands?"

Tommy wet suddenly dry lips. "No, no I don't. But I ain't hangin', not for another man's killin'--just to ease <u>his</u> conscience."

"So, if you draw your gun, it will be to kill a man you do not wish to kill." Avram spun on his heel to face the gunman. "And, with regret, you will kill Tommy."

Cord made no reply. He carefully holstered the wicked .44, standing relaxed--waiting--before the proud Texan. "He doesn't have to draw on me."

"Damn!" Tommy spit contemptously, "that does it! Avram, get out of the way! Now!"

Avram stood his ground, his expressive blue eyes leveled on the strange gray-green eyes of the gunman. "Cord, vengence is God's right--not yours. HE does not make mistakes." Avram reached imploringly for the gunman's arm, feeling the muscles taut under his fingers. "Can you be <u>that</u> sure of Tommy's guilt?"

Cord stared at the Texan, who drew himself up straighter, his mouth set in determination. Reading the decision in Tommy's hazel eyes, he stiffened. Lillard was ready to die, but he would not admit his guilt.

'Avram, back out of this." Tommy addressed the gunman, "Cord, I don't want him hurt."

"He won't be."

"Okay, let's get this over with."

"Belinsky. Back off."

"Tommy?" Avram pleaded once more. "Cord. Don't do this thing."

"Sorry, Pard. Now get out of the way."

Avram backed slowly, helplessly, away from the two men. "Tommy," he whispered. "I believe you."

"I know, Cuz, thanks. Cord, your move."

"Yours, Lillard. You're gonna need the break."

"Yeah," Tommy drew a deep breath, "I guess." His right hand fell slowly to his side until his fingers were scant inches from the butt of the Colt revolver. He stared into the unfathomable depths of the strange gray-green eyes. The gunman, inches taller than his own six foot statue, stood relaxed--easy--as he waited.

Tommy's eyes unknowingly signalled his move to the experienced gunslinger as his hand sped toward the holstered Colt. His fingers circled about the butt, from long habit, fully cocking the weapon as he completed the draw.

Tommy Lillard was good. Very good. And, he realized, as he looked up into the leveled muzzle of the fully drawn .44 that it had been his fastest draw, ever. It had not been good enough.

The .44 roared.

The Colt jerked in Tommy's hand. The hot lead tearing the weapon from him, burning his fingers as he relinquished his hold. He stood, shaken, before the smoking .44.

"End it, damn it! I ain't gonna admit to a killin' I didn't do!"

The hand on the .44 tightened but something sparked behind the strange eyes. The muzzle slowly dropped.

Tommy stared in disbelief at the indecision in the man's cold features. "You--you believe me?"

"I don't--know. I want to," Cord glanced at the black-frocked Rabbi, "for him." A look of obvious pain crossed his sharp features. "maybe for--me. But McGuire--," he glanced up and the old hatred flared. "I <u>owe</u> him--"

"There are other ways to pay that debt, Cord." Tommy whispered. "His killer's dead. What does it matter how--or why?"

"I <u>want</u> to believe you." The .44 waivered.

Tommy stood very still, reading the conflicting emotions warring within the man. Slowly the .44's muzzle fell. Cord released the pressure on the hammer and slowly holstered the revolver.

Tommy drew a thankful breath before glancing at his numbed fingers, moving them painfully, reassuring himself they had not been permenantly damanged. Only then did he realized just how badly he had been beaten. It was an unsettling realization, and he quickly forced it into the deepest recesses of his mind. It was something he did not wish to dwell on. He stood awkwardly before the gunman unable to break the uneasy silence between them.

"Cord," Avram moved forward to clasp the gunman's hand, heedless of the stiffening in the man at the unfamiliar touch to his right hand. "You are--a good man. Thank you."

Cord hesitantly accepted the Rabbi's hand then tightened his fingers in acknowledgement of Avram's gratitude.

"Cord, I wish I could make it easier for you," Tommy commented softly.

"You can't," the pain was there again in his voice, "just get the hell out of here before I change my mind."

"I hope, Rápido, you do not change it because of me."

The three men whirled at the sound of the strange voice behind them.

"Goddamn, what more can happen? Who the hell--" Tommy swore under his breath, studying the tall Mexican who had ridden in unnoticed to the edge of their camp.

"Pico!" Avram shouted in greeting.

"Who?" Tommy asked, glancing from the dismounting Mexican to the gunslinger who was moving to greet him.

"Pico McGuire. He is the man who helped me in town." Avram started forward only to be stopped by Tommy's quick hand. "Wait!"

Cord had stopped before the Mexican whose arm went out to the tall man in greeting. Cord grasped his arm tightly. They stood for several moments neither willing to disturb the moment.

"Rápido--I came as quickly as I could sit a horse. Wingate told me of your plans--his fears." He glanced with regret at the bodies of the miners, "I'm sorry I did not get here sooner--"

"But--when I left--" Cord studiesd his friend closely, reading the pain behind the man's drawn, pale features. "I saw the wound."

"Sí, it was bad." McGuire agreed. "But it looked worse than it was. It angled up--bounced off a rib--and out. Alot of blood, but, by the saints, it did little damage. Señor Wight is a very good medic. Better, I think, compadre, than you are avenger," he stated affectionately. "He is not the one, Rapido."

"Yeah, I know--" Cord breathed wearily. "Now."

"McGuire--" realization fickered in the Texan's hazel eyes, then amazement, "how did you find us--him?"

McGuire ground-tied his horse. Moving to the dying fire, he filled a cup with coffee from the pot which stood forgotten beside the still glowing coals before turning to face the puzzled Texan. " I have found following Rápido is always easier than one might think. People remember him. Talk about him. He is not easily forgotten. They will talk to strangers about him, much quicker than they will talk to him about anyone he seeks. I had made good time until reached Hell Town. Rápido had been there and I knew I was close to catching up to him. But I had been pushing too hard, my wound forced me to stop, to rest. I was getting ready to ride out when Avram, here, had the run-in with these two malditos." McGuire shrugged broad shoulders. "I saddled up and drifted this way thinking to keep an eye open for anyone trying to follow him. I had lost his trail when I heard the shots."

Tommy shook his head slowly in disbelief. "Wish you'd drifted in a couple of days ago. I got damned tired of trying to talk sense to this 'friend' of yours." He turned to the gunslinger. "You're one damn stubborn man!"

An eyebrow raised at Lillard's words. "You didn't have to go for that gun, Friend. You could have gone back with me--proven your innocence."

"To an Army post whose CO sent you after the man guilty of killing that paymaster and stealin' that payroll? Me ridin' that bay?" Tommy studied Cord closely. "Would I've been believed? With you so damned sure of my guilt, so damned set on revenging a friend's death--would I've had any kind of chance at clearing myself?"

"Wingate's a fair man. He would have listened," Cord stated honestly.

"And?" Tommy pressed.

Cord drew a deep breath, but his eyes met and held Tommy's questioning gaze. "He would have hanged you."

"Yeah," Tommy sighed. "That's what I figured. <u>That</u>'s why I went for the gun--figured it was the <u>only</u> chance I had."

"I think, amigo mío," McGuire inquired softly of the gunslinger, "you owe this man an apology, no?"

A twisted smile pulled at the gunslinger's face. "I <u>have</u> apologized, Amigo. I didn't kill him."

Pico McGuire laughed. "Si, perhaps, to you, that is an apology. To him, I think not. For me, Rápido, apologize."

The strange eyes softened. "For you."

Cord turned and for the first time since they had met, Tommy saw something akin to compassion in the gunman's eyes instead of the smouldering anger and the cold desire to kill.

"Lillard, McGuire's right, I owe you an apology. It doesn't come easy--I'm not good at this--"

"I can believe that," Tommy replied pleasantly, a sparkle of mischief burning behind the innocent hazel eyes.

Avram groaned, "Tommy--no--" he whispered, closing his eyes to his friend's anticipated actions.

Tommy rocked forward on the balls of his feet then lashed out, the unexpected blow catching the gunman on the point of the chin. He went down. The Texan rubbed his fist, fingering the smarting knuckles, before stretching his hand out to the seated gunman whose right hand had coiled about the butt of the deadily .44. "Apology accepted," Tommy stated easily.

Cord sat still, the gray-green eyes dark, unreadable, his hand on the .44 unmoving. Slowly the hand relaxed, then released the gun. Cord reached out to the offered hand.

Tommy pulled him easily to his feet. "I figure I owed you that," Tommy explained smiling. "No hard feelings?"

The two men's hands remained tightly glasped for a moment before Cord released his grip. "No. No hard feelings." He gingerly touched his bruised chin. "You throw one goddamn hard punch."

Tommy grinned, pleased when Cord returned it with one of his own.

"You do realize I'll be taking the payroll back with me," Cord exclaimed pleasantly.

"And the bay?" Tommy inquired.

"And the bay," Cord assured him. "Pico, Santee is tied with Streak behind the camp. I'm assumin' you'd be wantin' him back."

"Ah, fortune smiles on this most unworthy," McGuire smiled. "Sí, Rápido, comono!"

Tommy nodded his acceptance then turned to the silent Rabbi, "Well, you've been damned quiet through all this. Ain't you got anything to say?"

Avram Belinsky met his friend's questioning gaze forlornly. "I was thinking. Today two men have died. For them I have said a prayer of forgiveness. But perhaps we have been forgiven--for two good men have not died; Pico and you. I am truly thankful.

Tommy smiled, his hazel eyes soft with understanding of the pain he read in Avram's eyes. "Cuz, I ain't gonna try to explain this. These men came looking for trouble--like Diggs, 'member? Cord did what had to be done--what I would have done."

"Yes," Avram sighed, "some things can not be helped."

"Look, why don't you help Cord with the horses," Tommy suggested. "Find their's," he motioned toward the bodies. "Take the best, turn the other one lose. I don't think any of us whan to stay here any longer. McGuire and I'll see to--what has to be done here."

XII.

Tommy gazed down at the river bank and the fresh slide which covered the bodies of the two men he and McGuire had buried there. He sighed, turning away from the unmarked graves to look down river, absorbing the peacefulness of the waning day.

McGuire sat down, still weak from his partically healed wound, his back to a willow that leaned out over the slow-moving water. Watching the Texan, he fashioned a smoke then offered the makings to the silent cowboy. Tommy refused with a shake of his head.

"I'm sorry, Amigo, that the two of you had to meet under these circumstances."

Tommy nodded absently, unwilling to break the peacefulness around him, reluctant to talk about the tall gunman and their relationship of the last few days.

"He is a good man."

"Yeah," Tommy whispered. "Good at killin'--damned good at killin'."

McGuire drew a lungful of smoke, then slowly exhaled. "Sí, he is good at what he does. But you do not understand him, Amigo."

"Do you?" Tommy inquired, his eyes staying on the glistening highlights of the river.

McGuire chuckled. "At times--sí. Other times--¿quién sabe--?" he shrugged. "How well can any one man know another? How well do you know Avram? How well does he know you? If the friendship is strong, the weakness of one becomes the strength of the other. Our friendship, Rápido's and mine, has been a strength--a need--to us both." He gazed out across the river, his gray eyes dark with memories. It

has not been easy. Rápido had forgotten how to trust--any man. I had forgotten what it meant to give--as well as take--in a sharing. It is working, Amigo. You fear the man you say today, no?"

"Yeah," Tommy admitted. "He scares the hell out of me."

"Two years ago," McGuire shook his head, "he would have killed you, Señior, the moment your hand touched your gun. Es muy rápido--"

"Yeah, I guess."

"No, Señior, there is no guess." He smiled at a sudden thought. "You are one very fortunate man--to be alive."

"I knew that when I looked into the muzzle of that .44 of his," Tommy snapped.

"No, that is not what I was talking about," McGuire shook his head. "To the best of my knowledge, you are the only man who has ever laid a hand on Rápido and lived to tell about it. Even now, after all this time, I do not think I would ever touch him in anger. Perhaps it is working, this friendship of ours."

Tommy glanced sharply at the pondering Mexican-Irish. "What the hell are you talking about?" He stared in disbelief. "You mean he would have killed me for knockin' him down?!"

"Amigo, have you looked--looked--at Rápido's hands? They are not the hands of a brawler. They are the hands of a gunman. Mi compadre is not known for his compassion, nor does he have much of a sense of humor," McGuire stared at the Texan's bewildered expression. "Do you know how close to death you were?" He shook his head in disbelief as Tommy continued to stare. "You do not. Amigo, do you know who Rápido is?"

Tommy swore softly, "Of course I know who he is--I mean," he hedged, meeting McGuire's steady gaze, "I mean I know what he is--"

"You have never heard of him?"

Tommy slowly shook his head. "I thought the name had a familiar ring to it--but--"

McGuire laughed. "Ah, the innocence of the ignorant has truly smiled on you, my friend. You have not heard of the man called Cord. Have you heard of a man called The Gunslinger?"

Tommy's brow wrinkled for a moment before he met the Mexican's inquiring gaze. "The man who carries the 'rep' as the fastest gun in the southwest?" Tommy swore. "You're not serious? Those are stories to scare little boys with--to keep 'em at home--"

"Sí," McGuire smiled, "but to every story there is a basis of truth. You can believe most of what you've heard, I promise you, you can believe most of what you've heard."

Tommy glanced back at the picketted horses. "Cord is the Gunslinger?"

"Sí."

Tommy slowly shook his head, running nervous fingers through his unruly mop of sun-bleached brown hair. "I must be livin' right. Maybe all that exposure to Avram has put me in Someone's graces." A sudden thought pulled his gaze back to the smiling Mexican-Irish. "Maybe Cord's mellowing?"

Pico laughed. "Rápido? Mellowing? Sí, now that is a thought. Treasure it, Amigo, it will make a fine story to tell your grandchildren.

* * * * * * * * * *

Tommy Lillard held the buckskin on a tight rein as Avram pulled the chestnut along side him on the narrow trail. He watched the Rabbi raise his hand again in farewell to the departing riders who left the trail well ahead of them, headed southward. For several moments, the two men shared the silence of the increasing twilight until the declining daylight swallowed the two riders they watched.

"Do you think they'll ever come to San Francisco? That we will ever see them again?" Avram asked plaintively.

Tommy shrugged. "Who knows, Cuz. Strange circumstances brought the four of us together this time." He chuckled softly. "Next time, I hope it's a friendly chat over a bottle of good drinkin' whiskey instead of over the barrel of his .44. Just the thought of how close I came to buyin' it--" his voice trailed off. "McGuire said it all, that hombre is muy rapido."

"So much has happened since I left Rosalee and San Francisco." Avram pondered thoughtfully. "So many wonderful adventures I have had since coming to this wonderful country. So many wonderful new friends have I met: a bank robber, a Mexican chowboy and a slinger of guns. Such a wonderful place is this American West. Such wonderful people."

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"Yeah, wonderful," Tommy agreed without enthusaism. "Come on, let's make some time before we have to stop for the night. I've seen enough of this place to last a lifetime--mine, at least."

The buckskin took the free rein eagerly and moved into a gentle trot, keeping pace with the friendly chestnut beside him. "You've got a wife waitin' for you, and we're over-due. She'll likely have my hide for worrying her."

Avram glanced about the darkening road, the evening sounds pleasant in the growing darkness of coming night. "You are sure this is the way to San Francisco?"

Tommy glanced at his friend, the roguish smile pulled at his handsome features. "Trust me."

Avram returned the smile, friendship bright in his expressive eyes, "Always."

Drifter

Been a drifter all my life
and nobody gave a damn.
But you called me 'friend'.
I don't have time for friends.
They hold you down,
and I gotta be free.
Always thought I was strong --
had to be to survive out here.
But you showed me that real strength
comes from inside you.
Damn, I'm tired of runnin'.
I'm tired of loneliness,
and I'm tired of bein' 'free'.
Now I know what I was missin', Avram --
I needed a friend.

by

René

Schneider

Soliloquy Mid-Watch

Look at 'em, sleeping
huddled like pups in a
blanket nest

if we had a fire

Shoulders aching
hug my body.
Colonels don't shiver. Tomorrow
maybe a farm
cattle and
warm sweet-smelling horses

We should be moving by night

if we get lost

But Weaver's hurting
Mallory's lame and

if we get lost

I don't want to push them

I wish Doug was here. He was
good at this stuff. He was
a good soldier. He was

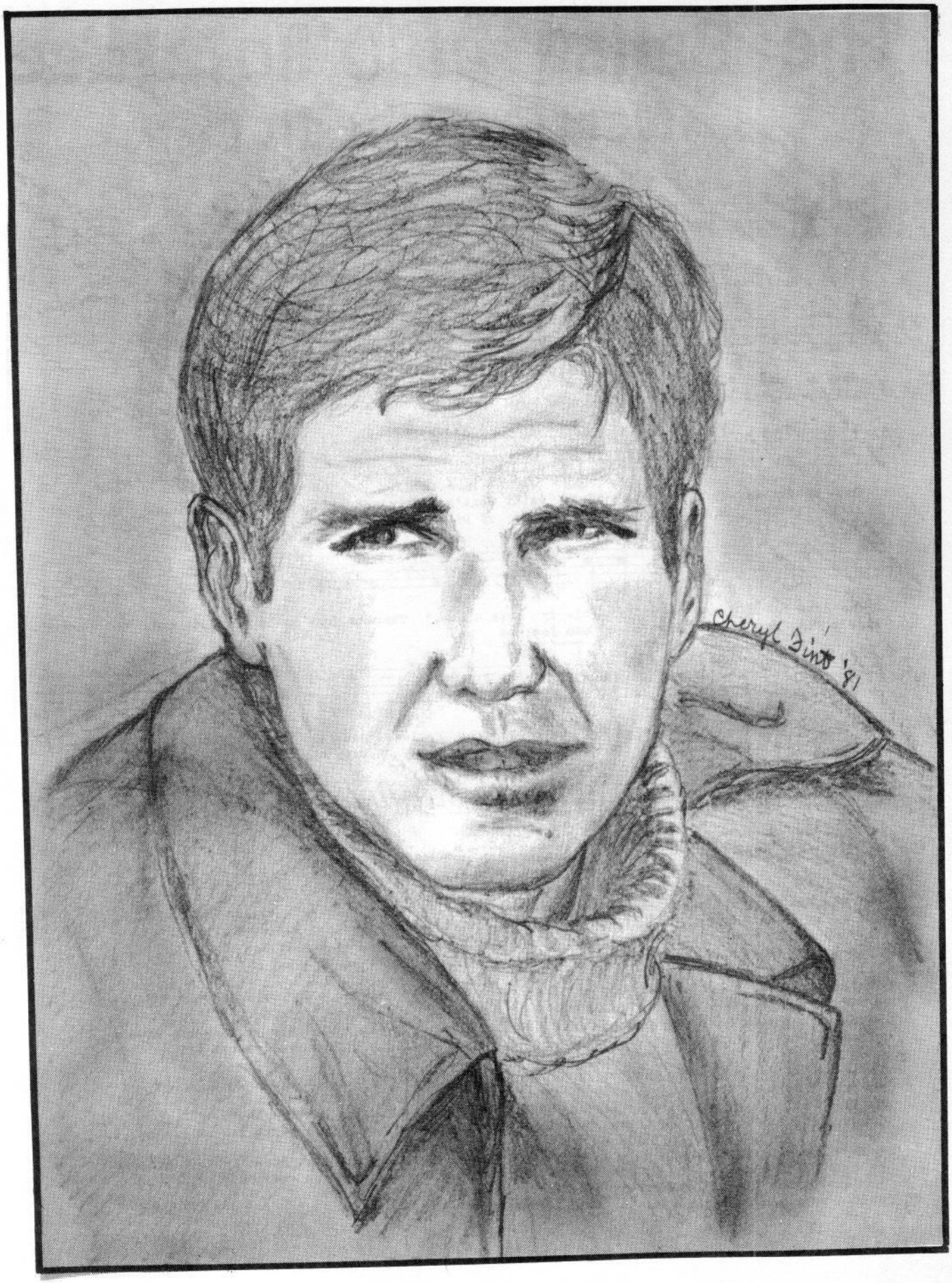
I shoulda been watchin'
that fairy sergeant
'it is not correct'

These guys don't like me much.

cold
so cold

That's okay.
I'm doin' my job.

Michelle Quesnel


Cheryl Dino '81

The Ballad of D'kota Lee

Martie Benedict

I was out with One- Eyed Shan- dy, we was down at the Set- tin' Sun,
Well, the great big dude with the grin and the gun was look- in' a- round the room,
When a dude blew in with a men- ac- in' grin and a great big la- ser gun. Well,
All the lights and noise and the good ol' boys got qui- et as a tomb. He says, "I'm
One- Eyed Shan- dy says to me, "Just watch what's go- in' down; that man in the back all
look- in' for a spac- er man by the name of D'- ko- ta Lee; they say he's fast, but his
dressed in black's gon- na cru- ci- fy this clown." There's gon- na be a shoot- out,
time's gone past, and there's no one fast as me. Fast as me,
there's gon- na be a shoot- out. And some- bod- y yelled, "Bet- ter run like hell,
fast as me ——, They say he's fast, but his time's gone past, and there's
There's gon- na be a shoot- out."
no one fast as me."

Now Lee was tall and handsome, with a cool assessing style. He had twin custom laser guns,
and an enigmatic smile. And D'kota Lee says, "Brother, you're headed for some grief.
Your mouth just dug your grave for you, and that is my belief. My belief,
my belief, your mouth just dug your grave for you, and that is my belief."

"Well, talk is cheap," the big man said, "Now get yourself in gear. Better move your butt,
or I'll tell you what, I'm gonna blow it out your ear." "Don't say I did not warn you,"
says Lee and took a stance, and if looks could kill the big man would have trashed him with a
glance. With a glance, with a glance, if looks could kill the big man would have trashed him with
a glance.

So he went for his blaster, and ev'ryone hit the floor, but we all could see that D'kota Lee
was about to make a score. He whipped them two big cannons out, and the flash was seen by all.
He fired twice, put the dude on ice, and blew him through the wall. Through the wall,
through the wall. He fired twice, put the dude on ice, and blew him through the wall.

Well, I says to One-Eyed Shandy, as we got back on our feet, "That Lee is really something else,
he handled that so sweet. Extr'ordinary gorgeous too, and a very sharp gun hand.
You must agree that D'kota Lee is one hell of a man." Quite a man,
what a man, you must agree that D'kota Lee was one hell of a man.

Relative Situations

Martie Benedict

illustrated by Wanda Lybarger

It was raining snakes. The flying reptiles of Aca, having mated and gestated on the jungle's lush floor, now took to the humid, gray skies to bear their lively young -- thousands of slitherers resembling sections of Barric-drive cable -- an inundation of squirming white bodies that thudded against the hull of the *Millennium Falcon* in a maddeningly fleshy tatoo.

His expression becoming increasingly discontented, Captain Han Solo lounged at the star freighter's main controls. Waiting was always a chore, but waiting amid a downpour of snakes was beginning to take its toll of his scant reserves of patience.

To this right, the copilot's space was filled to overflowing by the furred bulk of Solo's Wookiee partner and First Mate, Chewbacca. A seven-foot russet dynamo in a fight, Chewie was at the moment taking advantage of the wait to put the finishing touches on an elegant piece of scrimshaw, a pendant of Brockederon bone.

Solo eyed the piece casually. "For Malla?" The Wookiee nodded.

"Going home soon?" Chewie responded with his usual economy of phrase.

"Whaddya mean, I don't have to worry? Think the idea of parting company with you worries me?" The young pilot snorted derisvely. "No sleep lost over that -- you come and go as you please..." He tapered off into peevish silence.

Chewie glanced sideways at his Captain's scowling profile. Sharp features, eyes deep set and guarded beneath lowering brows, a determined tension to the jaw. *Kid needs a haircut,* he thought, and returned to his carving.

"Where the hell is Darmekka?" the pilot groused, and as though mention of the name had summoned him, a cheerful voice hailed them over the comnet.

"Solo! Wookiee! I can see your ship from here. I'm on a ridge off to your right. How ya' doin'!?"

Chewbacca flipped open a ship-out channel and Han responded, "Great! Great! Up to our butts in snakes! Couldn't be finer!"

"Snakes ain't my fault! You want your cargo, or you want to do a turn on the native fauna?" Not waiting for a reply he continued, "I got lots of stuff to go under your cover -- hometown brandy, the works."

Suddenly the snakes quit falling.

The sun was beginning to brighten the murky jungle depths to a pleasant pattern of greens, and Solo felt his spirits rise a bit. "I'm on my way," he told the other smuggler.

Chewie, as was their custom, remained aboard the *Falcon* manning the armaments, alert for anything untoward, though it wasn't long before the Corellian returned aboard a small ATV used for short distance cargo hauling. Perched on the stacked freight was the affable smuggler, Darmekka, a green skinned Toovoolan with the flame orange hair common to the males of his species. The Wookiee thought he blended in nicely with the general jungle ambience.

"Graf k'Ooortric - O'zhee'itt!" Darmekka shouted toward the cockpit. Chewie flipped open a hailer and roared back the formally correct insult.

"Ah, knock if off, you two," Solo said. "Chewie, get back and give us a hand!"

Under the belly of the star freighter, Solo and Darmekka busily dragged the cargo cases beneath an open hatch while the Wookiee tractored them up one by one and stacked them inside. They passed what, among the vast fraternity of a larcenous subculture, amounted to the time of day. Suddenly from above came the sound of a massive breakage of glass and the slosh and drip of liquid.

"What the hell are you doing up there?" Han inquired sharply. Chewie howled back a reply.

"Damn! A whole case of Toovoolan all over the...the...Oh No!"

"What's got into you?" Darmekka frowned.

"The cover, our cover shipment..." Han seemed distracted, somewhere between fear and laughter.

"So, what's your cover? Ain't irreplaceable, you can bet on that."

Lybarger '81

"Huh? No, no. But it's Nugroot hides -- big bales of Nugroot hides, and you know what happens when you put Toovoolian anywhere near Nugroot?" Darmekka blanched, becoming a shade of palest green, and swallowed convulsively. Their eyes met. In unison they said, "It stinks like a Brockederon in heat!"

On the very tail end of the last word came a terrible sound. Something between a groan and a scream, only quantum leaps beyond anything a human, Wookiee or Toovoolan could produce, blasted into the clearing, shaking the trees and sending Han and Darmekka to their knees, stunned.

Han staggered up. "Great noses they got!" he snarled.

Darmekka looked befuddled. "Oh, no," he whispered. "Let's get out of here..."

"Chewie!" Han yelled up into the open hatch, "Fire her up! We gotta get off the ground FAST!"

"My transport..." Darmekka began.

"Not now! Get up there and tractor the rest of this stuff in. Breakage won't matter. GO!" Casting a worried glance round about the Toovoolan scrambled up into the *Falcon's* cargo hold and began operating the lifter while Han worked feverishly to drag as much as possible beneath the humming tractor field. Another great roar slammed into them, and amid the din they could feel the earth shudder as something enormous approached.

Adrenalin-scared, but determined, Han shoved the last cargo case into place and watched it disappear into the hold. Then a ground jarring thud lost him his balance and he found himself sucked up into the cargo tractor's field. "Cut it off !" he hollered as he sailed past the bewildered Toovoolan.

Darmekka did as he was told, just as Han reached the ceiling grid. "You flaming pleek!" Solo managed as he crashed gracelessly onto a pile of Nugroot hides.

But the Brockederon was on them by that time and Han prudently saved his invective for a less hectic moment. Sprinting toward the forward control compartment he felt the *Falcon* tremble as the giant beast threw its two grappling appendages about her hull in a vast embrace.

The Wookiee had the engines up to lift heat, ready for Solo to give the word. As soon as his "Chewie, get us out of here!" preceeded him down the corridor, the copilot initiated lift sequence, and the *Falcon's* big gravity flaunting engines began to howl as she fought to free herself from the amorous Brock. But the starship's engineers had designed her to pull free of a variety of gravities -- not the tenacious clutches of a Brockederon with lubricous ideas.

Solo slid into the pilot's seat, harried and angry. What the aft viewscreen showed him was so outrageous he refused to consider it, but he was having a hard time stifling a burst of laughter, in spite of the danger.

A violent jolt shook the *Falcon* as the Brockederon got down to business.

Behind the pilots Darmekka broke the seal on a bottle of Toovoolian and took a long pull just as another great lurch from behind sent them all reeling.

"This is embarrassing!" Solo snapped. Chewie hooted with amusement and Darmekka choked on his brandy, overcome with a fit of giggling.

Laughter tugging at the corners of his mouth, Han said, "Sorry, fella, but you picked the wrong lady this time," and, pulling the firing level, sent a burst from the belly quad gun right into what the after viewscreen was showing him.

The Brock howled in painful surprise as he took a nasty laser jolt in a most vital spot. The appendages snapped free, and the *Millennium Falcon* shot up past tree level before Chewie could cut her to hover.

Han brought the ship about, safely distant from the fuming creature who crouched in the jungle clearing, looking up at them with what they could only surmise was a bad case of the Estarian toothache. It resembled nothing so much as a mark who'd been stiffed by his honey.

Between guffaws, giggles and howls they tried vainly to tell each other -- with partial phrases and helpless gestures -- exactly how funny it was.

* * *

Chance's Setting Sun Saloon down on Urango was, in an impossibly vast galaxy, one of Han Solo's favorite spots. The drinks were generous, the gaming wide-open, the food excellent and various and the proprietress a good friend of his, a very special friend.

Leaving Chewbacca to make a long-distance vidcom call to his Malla, Han went to renew old acquaintances.

Almost as though she'd known he was coming, Chance answered the door to her private suite herself. She didn't even look surprised.

"My man's back," she grinned, freckles dancing across the bridge of her short, straight nose. Her eyes were dark and wine-colored.

"I do love you in white, Chance," Solo said appreciatively. "How'd you know I was coming?"

"I started feeling good. Right here." She gestured and they both laughed as she slid an arm around his waist and pulled him inside.

"My place is about as close to a home as you've got, isn't it?" she said, closing the door and discreetly switching the caller-code to Don't Disturb -- No Exceptions.

"Just about," he agreed, looking around the familiar rooms.

Younger than he was by a few standards, Chance was without a doubt one of the richest women on Urango, a lady of excellent taste, generosity of spirit and some of the most compatible notions about amorous matters he'd ever been fortunate enough to encounter.

He turned, hands on hips, to look her up and down, smiling. "It's been a while," he said at last.

"That's a hint," she replied with her lop-sided grin. "Ready?"

"Umm."

"Okay, watch." Moving to stand before him, she raised her hands to the two decorative pins adorning her ornate coiffure and swept them out like small swords. With a silken rush her auburn hair cascaded free, the ends just brushing the lush tapestry carpet at her feet. Solo dug himself in up the elbows muttering something intense but unintelligible. Chance laughed softly, reaching down to press the release catch on the Corellian's gun belt. "Welcome home," she whispered.

* * *

Some while later Chance planted a kiss on the end of his nose.

"Love you, Han. Absolutely one of a kind...How about a bath, now that you're all relaxed? Kalla crystals, hot waves, the works...I've had a new spa installed since last time."

"Are you trying to tell me something?"

"You smell like a Wookiee..."

"That doesn't surprise me."

"...And now I smell like a Wookiee, too, so I'll join you."

"First a drink." He stretched lazily.

"Oh, you're not relaxed enough yet."

"Oh, yeah, I'm relaxed. The drink's to get me on my feet."

She laughed, reaching up to the intricately carved headboard where a panel with an array of buttons was inset, and pressed one, then waited a moment. Suddenly barroom noises intruded as one of the stewards answered her summons over the intercom. Chance gave the order and was about to punch out when Solo said, "What's that?"

"What's what?"

"The music."

Chance gave him a sidelong glance. "Let's see," she replied, and punched up a monitor screen on the window-sized console opposite them.

"Still run this place like the Imperial snooper corps, don't you?"

"Damn right. Got to protect my investment." The screen glowed to life and Chance panned the bar manually, holding when the scene showed them a man with a reso-harp. "There's your singer," she said.

The man was dressed all in black, including a preposterously rakish hat adorned with a swirl of feathers. He lounged atop the bar, one booted foot cocked against the railing as he strummed the harp and sang a rousing chorus of "Halladin's Woman" with a smirk and panache that made Han's lip curl.

> "Oh, Halladin Tret was a captain's cornet in the regimental corps
> A hardass was he and real s.o.b. who delighted in blood and gore
> His lovely young wife was the pride of his life, a woman to make a man sigh
> Brin was her name and her beauty her fame, but she had a rovin' eye.
> An eye, an eye, an eye and an eye and an eye,
> A summons from Brin could do a man in, for she had a rovin' eye..."

Then a hush fell over the saloon. Han reached for the manual camera control and searched for the cause of the [illegible] a big gunman [illegible] and tough looking [illegible] was standing just inside the entrance, and in the unnatural quiet Solo heard him say, "I'm looking for D'Kota Lee. Somebody tell that bastard Tron Rep's here, and I got

"Hey, Chance, look at this. They're going to shoot your place up."

"Not likely." The woman didn't seem concerned. "But let's watch anyway." She settled back against his chest with an enigmatic smile.

"Can I get a wide screen on this thing?" he asked.

"Sure, push that." At once they had a comprehensive picture of the saloon beneath them, and Han saw to his surprise that the singer in black was the sought after D'Kota Lee.

The slender young man pushed himself lightly off the bar and assumed a relaxed stance, hands at his side. He was smiling slightly and trading insults with the big gunman when the latter, without warning, went for his laser pistol with a jerky motion that Han saw immediately wouldn't be fast enough to take a suma-sloth. But he was unprepared for Lee's style. With a fluid move that widened Han's eyes, the younger gunman drew right to left and put two lase bolts directly in the big man's chest before the latter's gun had even cleared his holster.

"Custom power pack," he muttered with professional interest as he watched the unlucky challenger slam backwards with the force of impact and go halfway through an ornamental partition. There he hung, still looking very surprised, dripping and smoking.

Han switched off and shivered a little, thinking of the beautiful sweep of K'Kota Lee's quickdraw.

"C'mon, let's hit the showers," Chance suggested. "I've got a few surprises for you."

Their drinks had arrived. Han took a long swallow of his before he asked, "Who is that character anyway?"

"Kota Lee?" Chance replied with a grin, "Kota Lee's my brother."

* * *

Solo wasn't sure whether the revelation made him feel confident or uneasy. He was still pondering the alternatives one rather licentiously indulgent trip to the spa later when someone hit Chance's caller code override and a tiny light over the entrance to her suite began to pulse blue.

"Only two people in the galaxy know that override," she said, "and you're here, so it's got to be Kota." Uneasy, definitely uneasy, Solo decided.

He got up and stretched, casually circling to where his gunbelt lay draped across the foot of Chance's bed. He wondered briefly about the overt hostility of donning it over a lounge robe, and settled for sitting on the bed with his hand centimeters from his blaster.

At Chance's bidding her brother entered, followed closely by the Wookiee. Chewie called a greeting to Solo and, as he usually did, offered Chance a compliment on her hair.

The two gunmen locked eyes. Lee's were dark like his sister's, with burgundy depths. Han was unable to read anything there.

"Green flatters you," said D'Kota Lee. Alert for aggression, Han was momentarily at a loss.

"And you sing like a bird," he replied after a second. The burgundy eyes widened and Solo permitted himself a brief smile.

"You were watching, were you?" Both men relaxed a bit as Lee folded himself into a chair, stretching his legs out before him and cushioning his head with his hands. "Chance's told me a lot about you," he continued.

"Well, she hasn't told me a damn thing about you."

"Oh, I'm not surprised. She hasn't got nearly as much to talk about where I'm concerned." The gunman turned to his sister with that lazy, enigmatic smile they shared in common.

Solo was off balance. The situation apparently wasn't dangerous -- he knew Chance too well for that, but there was a sardonic and brittle edge to the repartee that puzzled him. It was Chance who voiced his silent question.

"So what brings you up here to hit my override, anyway? I didn't even know you were in town till a couple of hours ago, much less downstairs making messes for my bar boys."

"You know I only do that when the need arises," he chastened. "Besides, he interrupted my song. As for what I'm doing in town, I'll get to that in a minute. But why I'm up here, C. m'dear, is because I overheard this Wook telling one hell of a funny story about some Toovoolian-soaked Nugroot hides and a Brock, and I wanted to finally meet your Han Solo. I have a proposition..."

Solo had been looking the gunman over at close range. He wore high boots, not the utilitarian sort of spacers' gear Han generally wore, but intricately tooled and flared over snug fitting black trousers. His gunbelt was a variation on items Han had seen before, surely a custom job. Above that he wore a tight black singlet which left his well-defined arms and shoulders bare, and finally, the preposterous feathered hat over his straight, dark red hair. The affectation of a hat, Solo was thinking with distaste, was rather like mounting a Zoris Supressor on your dish antenna -- looked great, but it didn't do a damned thing. He was somewhere between

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puzzlement and annoyance when he heard the word 'proposition' and the old cash-possibility sense heightening snapped him out of his ruminations.

Seeing that he had Solo's attention, Lee continued, "You see, Chance may not have mentioned it, but I do some freelance re-distribution of corporate assets..."

"He means he's one of the slickest pirates around, a regular one-man withdrawal on the ARC Treasury."

"My sister exaggerates," Lee said without a trace of modesty.

Solo nodded. Smuggling and piracy were occupations he could understand.

"But," Lee continued, "I hit a few snags and had to cripple back to Urango as best I could. That luckless bastard," he glanced at the floor, "gave me a lift, then accused me of cheating him at Sky-Slide..."

"Gods, Kota, you never quit, do you?"

"Well, we had to do something during jump."

Chance was standing behind his chair toying absently with the bright plummage. Now she looked up startled, "But wait a minute! Where's your ship? Where's the *Seducer*?"

"Crashed on Ost..."

"Kota!" Chance came around the arm of the chair and faced him squarely, worried. "Why didn't you tell me? How long have you been here?"

"Damnit, C., I got troubles! I just got in today and dodged that Tron Rep character at the port. I needed to relax and think things through..."

"Singing dirty songs on my bar."

"So I relax funny. What difference does it make? I didn't want to override your caller-code, but when I found out Solo was here...I thought...well...You see I need a ship, and I need some help." He didn't say it as though the words came easily. For all his seeming insourcience, D'Kota Lee appeared to be a man with a problem.

Solo cut in, "You need my ship, right? So let's talk business." He was suddenly very conscious of the sybaretic setting, his opulant lounge robe, and he wished almost painfully for his shipboard attire. "Where do you need to go?"

Lee gestured with a thumb. "Back to Ost. The *Seducer* went down with a hold full of gomelinite."

Han smirked knowingly. "That's a good reason to go back."

"And," Lee finished, "my copilot. The Tockthons ganged us. I knew I couldn't get both of us out, so I shot myself free, and now I've got to go back."

"You left your copilot at the mercy of a bunch of savages?" It was Chance, indignant. The gunman took his sister's hand in a move both swift and gentle as though he sensed she were about to strike him and would forestall her.

He spoke to Solo directly. "It'll be all right. She's in stasis. I put her..."

"She? You space with your..." From out of the past a vision confronted Solo, a girl with a whimsical smile and a lot of honey-colored hair, and he remembered an offer he had once made. Ludee. She would have come with him, too. If she hadn't been in the wrong place at the wrong time. If she'd lived. Around the painful knot in his throat, he finished, "...with your woman?"

"Yes. My woman. The stasis was her idea. She's two chronits up. She knows I'll be back for her. Half the gomelinite for you and your partner if you'll help me."

The image of the girl's face was still bright behind Han's eyes, edged with light. It stung. Solo pursed his lips and let out a breath through his nostrils. With carefully calculated greed he asked, "How much gomelinite?"

Chance spread her hands and looked at the ceiling. "I don't know this man," she intoned softly.

Lee ignored his sister. "Five yards."

Chewbacca barked something at Solo.

"Well, the copilot says go," Lee remarked.

"You don't see too many humans who can understand Wook," said Solo.

Lee nodded agreement. "One more thing we have in common. Now, what about it?"

Han waited a moment until the girl's face disappeared. "All right," he said at last, "it's a deal."

K'Kota Lee was leaning forward, hand extended, when Chance broke in, "I'm going too." Both men, in the process of concluding a business agreement, looked at the woman in surprise

"Hell you are!" said Solo.

"C., honey, mind your store here..." Lee began in a patronizing tone that made the saloon owner's eyes flash a dangerous red.

"Don't pull that bit with me, Kota. I want a change of scenery."

"It's too dangerous."

"Ha! Who do you think you're talking to, anyway? What about Rynar and the Blue Moon, or the Soldenite Six-in-One? C'mon, Kota, get serious."

"I am serious, Chance. I...forbid you to go."

Though he had no intention of permitting her to go either, Solo thought privately that Lee was exaggerating the potential dangers a bit. It sounded like a mail run to him.

Apparently Chance was of the same mind. She whooped with laughter. "Forbid? Well, you can take that and shove it up your retro jets! Besides," she grinned at Han, "the ship's captain decides who's going, and my spacing friend here owes me."

Solo had stood up to impose his height upon her as an added authority gambit should she prove difficult to dissuade. He raised an eyebrow. "Just what do I owe you?"

Her grin widened. "Remember that night on Deveena? We made a bet which of us could go without...the longest? You lost."

Han sat down on the bed again. "Oh hell..."

"Remember? I said don't worry about paying me, I'd think of something later. Well, this is it. Transport to Ost. Fair's fair."

Lee was frowning. "Unfortunately, it sounds like she's got you."

"Oh hell," said Solo once more.

"Guess you'll just have to do your...exercises if you want to keep up with me," Chance replied. "Now, excuse me while I go throw a few things in a carryall."

With a swish of her lavishly embroidered gown, she turned and left the room. In her wake the *Falcon's* captain spread his hands helplessly, the bewilderment on his face betraying his momentary inability to fathom so crafty a creature as a woman.

* * *

Ost was nothing special. An insignificant planet in a negligable system a few hundred lights galactic north of Ganna, it was home to an autochrthonous race of furred humanoid mammals, one trading port, and very little else of interest. Way off the usual spacing lanes, it was an unlikely spot for a forced landing, but the gods knew, thought Solo, a pirate with five yards of gomelinite might go far afield to avoid complications.

The clearing where the *Falcon* set down was a wide swath of chewed up undergrowth cut by the *Seducer's* erratic passage. In the relatively short time since the crash the forest's abundant growth had already begun to claim the intruder as its own; and the wreck of D'Kota Lee's corvette, *Seducer*, was scarely to be seen beneath a riot of dark vines.

Lee cleared the *Falcon's* ramp first. He took a moment to assess the scene, alert, sharp-sensed, then strode forward toward the wreck, hauling out his right hip blaster. Setting it for wide angle dispersal, he laid down a searing stream of fire that splashed into the clinging growth, vaporizing it neatly in several bursts. While Chewie circled the *Falcon* cautiously, bowcaster at the ready, Solo and Chance came up behind Lee.

"Oh, Kota, your beautiful ship," she said sadly.

"What happened?" Solo wanted to know.

Lee shrugged. "Imbalance in the fuel-to-fire ratio, I think. She popped out of hyperspace all on her own, anyhow. I'd nursed her this far at space normal when she quit altogether. This," he gestured with disgust and remorse," was the best I could do."

"Could've been worse," Han ventured, but Lee was already pulling off his hat and scrambling through the compressed hatchway.

Solo glanced quickly around, then followed. Chance remained outside watching the sky.

The *Seducer's* interior was still relatively intact though it was eerie, and empty under its shroud of twisting vines -- the abandoned shrine of some ages old space god. Head room was scant but sufficient. Lee punched up a few controls and was rewarded with light from the several inboard systems still operating on rapidly depleting storage cells. The first thing they noticed was the stassis chamber, a custom feature built into a number of privately-owned vessels, a smugglers' expediency theoretically more foolproof than any hidden chambers. The time module inside this one, however, was missing.

D'Kota Lee slammed a palm into the chamber's framework. "Damn! They took it all right." He flung his plummed hat away and ran a frustrated hand through his mane of auburn hair.

"C'mon, Lee, at two chronits up you know she'd be safe in a supernova. No one can break the integrity of a statis field without the coordinates. Certainly not these backwoods Tochthons."

Lee turned to Solo with a grim, twisted smile, eyes narrowed and intense. "No, you wouldn't think so, would you?" he said softly. Turning abruptly he stalked aft. Solo followed, puzzled again, sure he was missing something. He looked down -- at his feet were several small tufts of greenish feathers. Solo instinctively flipped free the retaining strap on his holster and loosened the blaster in its leather berth.

The cargo hold was empty. The Tochthons had apparently taken everything, including batting and lifters.

"Well, Chewie can track them," Han said reasonably. It still seemed to be a far easier task than D'Kota Lee, by his nervous demeanor, was indicating, though Han was beginning to feel a premonition. And he never disregarded his instincts.

"Go with the Wookiee, and Chance and I'll follow at ground speed in the *Falcon*. We'll give you a kilometer of clearance." They were walking forward now, the deserted ship echoing dully to the sound of their boots and the occasional metallic clink of their gunbelts.

Lee ducked to retrieve his hat. "Okay. We'll work it that way. I can't think of anything else."

"Lee," Han stopped him before they reached the hatch. "Just one thing. We may be going out there to get out butts shot off. So I got to know first -- why in hell a feathered hat?"

Solo had expected laughter, accepted the possibility of anger, but D'Kota Lee smiled gently, almost shyly when he answered, "They're her feathers, Elil's. She's a Voolan."

Watching Lee's back, Han raised an eyebrow. A Voolan? So the pirate's hijacked lady was one of the almost-legendary Talathi, the winged women of the planet Voola. Once again, Solo reassessed his impression of D'Kota Lee. The man was more of an enigma than ever.

* * *

Now and again as the *Falcon* hummed along at treetop level, huge shadows darkened her hull. Enormous birds fully as large as the starship herself coursed between her and the sun, vast and potentially menacing though they offered her no violence. With his headset on, Han monitored the ground party's progress ahead of them, but his attention was on the giant birds. After some debate, and after observing their graceful glides, tacking against the prevailing winds, he and Chance christened them Aeolies.

Presently, Chewbacca's growl came over the comnet. Full of cautionaries, he indicated a habitation ahead. Solo acknowledged. Imagining the *Falcon* on tip-toe he scouted a clearing and set her down in silence, then following the direction finder, he and Chance made their way steathily through the undergrowth.

Chewie was mounting guard and halted them at the wood's edge. Beyond they could see the lip of a precipice and, at its verge, the dark form of Kota Lee, stretched full out, peering down. Chance and Solo dropped to a crouch, belly-crawled up the slope and eased in beside him. Below them perhaps 60 meters down and another 60 out into the wooded flat was an encampment of huts. What appeared to be ground effect vehicles, surface lifters and several pieces of gleaming armanent clustered about the housing. There was nothing Tochthonous about it.

Solo unslung his macrobinoculars and focused on a group of figures nearest the cliff. He shifted his weight, re-focused. After a moment he said, "Yags." Though the one word carried more loathing than fear, it was obvious Han Solo had no wish to cross lasers with any member of that cult of mutant outlaws.

"Yags, all right," Lee affirmed.

Solo stared at him with incredulous anger.

"What are Yags?" Chance wanted to know.

"Your death and news, honey," her brother replied.

"You sonofabitch," Solo hissed through clenched teeth. "You knew all along it was Yags. You didn't want her to come..." There was a lot more he wanted to say, most of it having to do with Lee's ancestory and sexual predilictions, but the proximity of the Yags tempered his fury somewhat. Muttering a few more choice imprecations, Han turned abruptly back to his binoculars.

Yags. Shit. Though their pathological aggressiveness usually precluded their grouping together Han supposed he'd stumbled onto an enclave who'd put aside their normal ferocity for the purposes of piracy. Just what he needed. Some mail run!

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"Sure I knew they were Yags," Lee said impassively. "Do you think I can get blown out of the sky by a Yag howler and not know it?"

"I ain't taking on any Yags," Solo growled deliberately, stressing each words. He didn't think he could see the gomelinite cases. They'd probably be in the sturdiest of the buildings, he supposed. But he could see the time module of a stassis chamber, angled against a vehicle while several Yags hacked futily at it with hand tools, its opaque blue surface indicating the stassis field was intact.

"What are Yags, somebody?"

"Solo, there's five yards of gomelinite down there -- five yards of gomelinite..."

"Which is five yards of gomelinite being sat on by a mess of the ugliest Yags I ever seen..."

"And my woman..."

"Flaming Fingerfux, you two! You sound like a duet! Will someone please tell me what Yags are and how we're going to get the girl and the gomelinite?"

"Chance, honey, a Yag is the meanest thing you ever saw, meaner than a drunk Corellian," Han whispered fiercely across Lee's back, "and I got no idea how in hell we're getting the girl and the gomelinite. But I'll tell you one thing -- the Tochthons aren't our biggest problem right now..."

Suddenly Chewie barked an urgent warning. Operating on pure gut inspiration, Solo acted fast. He scrambled back from the edge. "Just follow me," he said quickly, then he was skidding to a stop before the tall Wookiee. He whipped out his blaster and deposited it in Chewie's carryall pouch. That done, he raised his hands high overhead and, as loud as he dared, surrendered in Wookiee, as Chewbacca leveled the bowcaster at his middle.

Mystified, but accepting Solo's move as a sort of insrutable, and therefore divine, madness, Lee and Chance followed his lead, her small power pistol disappearing into the pouch only a moment before the first of a large number of man-high, russet-furred beings stepped from behind a tree, his spring loaded weapon cocked and ready.

In a moment the nervous foursome was surrounded by armed Tochthons, and if the humans and the Wookiee were ill at ease, the Tochthons were astonished at what appeared to be a large and godlike member of their own species -- magnificiently fanged and equipped with an arcane weapon of unknown powers -- with three of the hated Yags at his mercy.

"Look real scared," Solo muttered, quite unnecessarily.

* * *

The Tochthon village lay at the end of a kilometers-long march through the quiet forest. Aeolies shadowed their progress, making harsh comments from time to time.

Chance, her white coverall well-grimed and her carefully braided hair disheveled, was complaining under her breath when a jab in the ribs from a Tochthon pistol made her yelp. Chewie growled a threat to stay clear of his prisoners and the Tochthon backed off quickly. It was a dispirited and wary party that finally arrived at the cluster of huts beside a sluggish stream.

Here, without further ado, the three humans were bound at the wrists and shoved unceremoniously into a vacant structure while Chewie was ushered away amid a group of chattering natives.

"Han Solo," snapped Chance, when, but for the Tochthon guard at the entrance, they were left alone, "that was the dumbest thing you've ever done!"

"Dumb? What's dumb?"

"Giving up! Letting those miserable shag-nasties take us prisoner. By the Maker! If I didn't love you dearly, and if I didn't get the hots for your body occasionally, I swear I'd cheerfully strangle you!"

D'Kota Lee laughed ruefully at Han's expression which had gone from surprised to downright mean during her diatribe.

"Just you wait a minute, sister," Solo said, his temper very loosely in check. "One lase-shot up on the cliff and that whole bunch of Yags would've been swarming all over us." Han seemed frustrated with his inability to punctuate the verbal barrage with a suitably forceful gesture, looking around as though a spare, unfettered hand might suddenly appear from nowhere. He settled for a scowl. "At least the Yags don't have us. At least we know where our weapons are."

"Han's right, C. Only thing we could've done."

"Sorry," she sighed. "Guess I'm tense."

"Yeah, well, we're all tense, honey."

After a minute -- "I got an idea. How about a game of Transmogrify? I'll go first. Uh...okay, start with the Oracle of Keth."

"Coracle of Keth," offered Han, obviously not interested.

"Kota?"

"Coracle of Sith..."

They had worked it around to Manacle of Bliss which got a groan, when Chewie returned with the entire camp at his heels. The three captives looked up hopefully as the Wookiee spoke to Solo.

"He's convinced them we're not Yags," Han translated, and Lee nodded as Chewbacca briefed them on their current status. They were his personal captives, their fate in his hands.

Han grinned and started to scramble to his feet, only to have his copilot turn a wicked, fanged visage his way and roar a most obsence Wookiee threat. Solo sat back on his heels, stunned. Lee and his sister exchanged surprised glances.

The Wookiee howled again and launched into a long harangue, complete with carnivorous invectives which leaned heavily on various ways to do Yags to death, the excellent masculine attributes of his newfound friends (*small cousins...?* Han mouthed to the others, looking bewildered), and the clever use to which he was going to put his captives. He was going to force them to aid the valiant Tochthon warriors in an attack on the Yag encampment which, given the inestimable bravery of his small cousins, would surely spell death and disaster for the rat-dung Yags.

"Looks like we take on the Yags no matter what," Solo muttered. D'Kota Lee was whispering a hurried translation to Chance who continued to kneel submissively, eyes downward, although she was working to suppress a grin.

At last, and it was the longest speech Solo had ever heard from the Wook, Chewie gestured brusquely for the three captives to be untied. Lee had already worked free of his bonds, but no one was impolite enough to mention it. Then the food Chewbacca had ordered prepared for his prisoners arrived, and things began to look more cheerful, though the big Wookiee hit them with a parting shot, indicating to the Tochthons that it was merely an expediency so that they might keep up their strength for the ordeal ahead. Solo flipped an obscene gesture at his retreating back.

"Fur-ass pleek..." he muttered. "What the hell is this stuff?" He frowned dubiously at the bowl of steaming something. They all traded glances but remained none the wiser.

"Got to keep up your strength, you know," Chance cautioned. She delicately plucked out a chunk and tasted it. "Not awful. Go on, try it."

"C., why'd you insist on coming along?" Lee wanted to know.

"Because," she replied around a mouthful of something, "I'd heard the Tochthons of Ost were gourmet cooks."

"It's your fault, you know," Lee said morosely, staring at Solo with distaste. "You and your damn exercises..."

But the Corellian wasn't listening. Hand halfway to his mouth, a piece of something dripping unnoticed from his fingers, he was fixed on the middle distance. "I wonder," he said, frowning,"I wonder if those Aeolies might like Brockoderon...?"

* * *

The Yag camp lay quiet and dark in the cold stillness of pre-dawn. Frost rimed the short ground cover. Their breath visible, the three humans shivered, looking down from their vantage point upon the cliff.

Han Solo, his well-worn leather wind cheater providing some protection from the chill, stood a little apart from the others running a visual scan and doing a bit of extemporaneous triangulation in his head as he lined up landmarks by the light of Ost's waning moon, translating them into coordinates which his ship's computer would understand.

Kota Lee, his twin lase-guns once again strapped to his side, joined him at the cliff's edge. The Voolan's feathers adorning his hat stirred in the rising breeze. "D'ya think C. can do it?"

"She's flown the *Falcon* before," Han replied. Lee nodded.

"C'mon then," he said, tense, eager to move now that they had a plan, of sorts, of action.

"Right," said Solo. He made one final calculation then turned on his heel and headed into the forest, Chance and her brother a step behind.

* * *

Ostan dawn was a visual assult -- an eye-searing flare of luminous color that spread across the horizon and swept upward with a silent shout. Against its brilliant display, the *Millennium Falcon* was a tiny dark smudge.

In the forest at the cliff's foot a Tochton warparty began to form an armed ring about the Yag camp, drawing in close until the Yags were silently surrounded. Tochthons positioned themselves in trees as snipers. No Yag would leave the camp alive. Chewbacca had told them this, and so great was their hatred of the alien mutants who hunted them like beasts and so great their awe of the godlike outworlder in their midst, they believed him.

Lee and Solo crept as close as practicaly to the east boundary of the camp where Solo had last seen the stassis chamber. Though dawn was spreading above them, beneath the trees darkness still lingered, and in the shadows neither could be sure when it lay. Keeping in mind what was coming, they both felt the adrenalin working on them. Their eyes met for a moment. Neither one spoke. Lee drew left handed and aimed in the general direction of the camp. "Almost time," he said softly.

Han compressed his lips and peered up through the trees. "Yeah," he replied, "anytime now."

Then they both heard it together -- the boom and hiss of the *Millennium Falcon*'s passage through the upper airs. But beyond the sound of her high gravity drive was another -- a piercing, rising falling series of shrieks that tore through the clear morning air.

The *Falcon* broke into the clearing above them. From her underslung quadmont like some barbarian battle standard flew a tainted Nugroot hide. Twice she straffed the camp and on each run the *Falcon's* computer operated the cargo drop hatch and dumped a flapping load of hides on the unsuspecting camp. The Yags, alerted by the noise, stumbled sleepily from their huts just as the first of the Aeolies power-dived into the clearing, swift, strong and ravenous.

Their huge beaks ripped into the fallen hides, talons tore, and the morning was suddenly full of violence and winged fury that astonished and delighted Solo. The Aeolies' killing frenzy was more than he could have hoped for. Making no distinction between ersatz Brockoderon and Yag, they attacked and shredded all flesh.

Without conscious thought the two men began to back away from the carnage. Blood spurted and flowed freely. Screams, frantic lase fire, and shouted orders mingled cacaphoniously as the Yag gunners strove to reach their weapons. Yet the howler cannons were useless at close quarters, destroying more of their operators than Aeolies and, as Han watched fascinated, exploding in a blinding flash when a huge feathered body blocked its firing bore.

"You see the time module yet?" Lee asked, raising his voice to be heard over the pandemonium. Han thought he could, on the ground beside a two-man skyhopper. He pointed. Lee nodded.

"Just keep your eyes on it. That's what we'll go for."

"How about the gomelinite?" Han shouted. D'Kota Lee gave the Corellian a quick glance.

"The gomelinite's in the time module," he said.

"But, then...where's your Voolan?"

Lee looked up, shielding his eyes against the newly risen sun. He laughed. "She's at 16:00 O.C., and coming in fast."

Han followed his gaze. Approaching on the wind was a second wave of Aeolies, and at their head flew the most majestic sight Han had yet seen, a huge beast of vast pinion, upon his nape a tiny, brightly colored figure, her iridescent plummage glowing against the sky.

"What the hell, Lee!"

"I'll tell you later," he answered, still looking skyward, a smile softening his determined features.

Han turned his attention back to the melee, swearing under his breath. At once he grabbed the gunman's arm. "The gomelinite," he shouted.

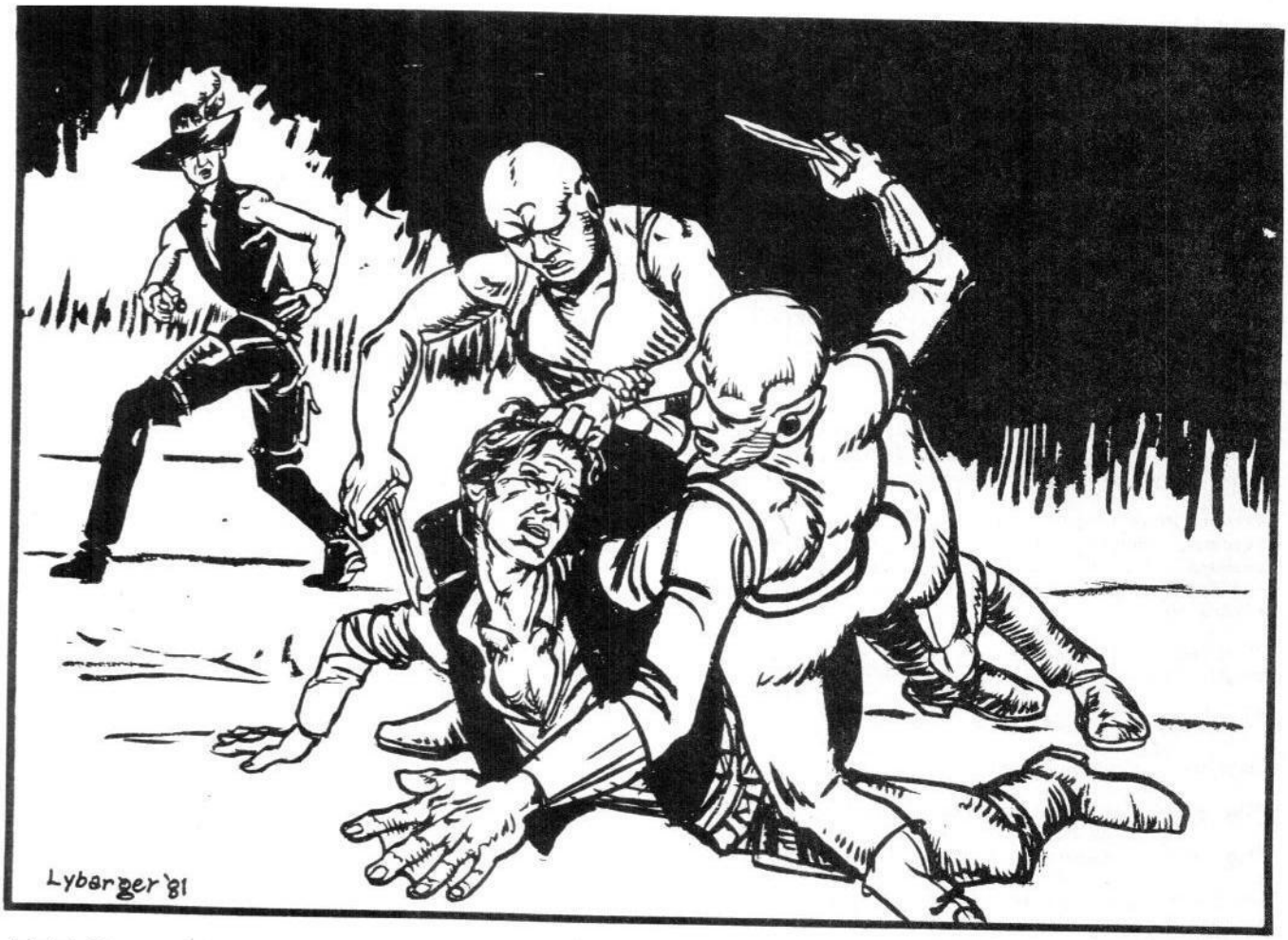
Lee looked down to see several relatively unarmed Yags lifting the time module and trying to wrestle it clumsily into the rear seat of the sky-hopper.

"Oh, no they don't!" he hollered, drawing his other gun and, oblivious to the danger, running toward the sanguinary scene.

"You're gonna DIE, you damn fool!" Solo called after him. But the lure of the gomelinite, and something about the vulnerable black clad figure, overrode his better judgment. He lay down a few rounds of cover fire then raced off after D'Kota Lee.

Firing on the move, Lee took a sizable chunk out of one Yag, who returned fire as he fell, the lase-flash erupting at Solo's feet. Solo ducked, shied right and fired again, missed.

Suddenly a fleshy weight crashed into him from behind. With gutteral oaths two Yags tackled the Corellian and brought him over heavily in the dirt, his blaster skidding out of his clutching grasp. They were killers, both, and wasted no efforts on the niceties of fisticuffs, one hauling his head back by the hair while the other drew a knife and slashed at his exposed throat, just as Solo twisted on his down hip and slammed his right knee into the knife-wielder's groin. The blow threw him off a fraction of an inch, and the blade meant for Solo's throat sheered into his partner's forearm. Before the knife-wielder could repeat the slash with greater accuracy, Solo kneed him once more, and scooping up a handful of dust, he heaved it over his right shoulder into what he hoped was his other assailant's face. The choking coughs from behind assured him he'd been successful. The hold on his hair let up, and he was able to roll quickly to a crouch, then scramble after his gun. But the Yag with the knife had other odeas. He sprang into Solo's path, the wicked blade flashing in and out, twisting, and Han felt pain then wetness envelope his right shoulder. Ignoring it he came up with a rounding left to the Yag's midsection, then threw himself backward to avoid another crimson-edged thrust. The sound of a lase-bolt



behind him a cryof pain disclosed D'Kota Lee's sudden attention to Han's predicament, followed swiftly by Lee's shout, "Solo! Catch!" Han whirled on one knee and snagged the tossed blaster with his left hand, whipping it around to bear on the Yag with a single fluid motion, and putting a trigger-lock barrage into his face as he lunged, knife foremost, for the wounded Corellian. The flare blinded him for a moment. When his sight cleared, what was left of the Yag appeared to be only so much Aeolie food.

Disregarding the knife-slash on his shoulder, Solo retrieved his blaster then looked around for Lee. A short distance away the remaining Yags had managed to load the time module and board the small ship. Lee was almost on them when the induction drive kicked in and she rose shakily.

With a tenacity Solo could only admire, the Urangan pirate flung himself across one extended wing, his toes dragging the dust in a futile effort to bring down the overloaded craft. But the Yag pilot hit emergency lift and yawed his port wing, breaking Lee's grip on the edge and throwing him clear as he forced the ship skyward with its precious cargo.

Solo got to his feet and made his way through the carnage, ducking and blasting away at the remaining Yags, silently thanking Kota for his prudence in equipping his lase-guns with custom power-packs. He drew up with the other gunman and caught in a rush of frustration, they watched the sky-hopper sail away.

"We can never get to the *Falcon* in time," Han said in dismay. He could see her grounded on the cliff to their right where Chance, having done her part, now awaited further instructions.

"No," Lee agreed, the enigmatic smile playing across his lips, "but we do have wings." He pulled out a lavalier comlink and said, "Elil, *elept'a, laspen'en.*"

"You've been in touch with her all along."

"Sure. Look, I'll explain later. Now we've got to catch the next flight out of here."

Han Solo never knew what demons of greed possessed him that morning, and he never forgot the ride they gave him, either, urging him on the heels of D'Kota Lee toward the massive Aeolie which spiriled to a landing at the northern border of the camp, up its extended wing and astride its sleek feathered neck behind the gunman and his amazing Voolan bird rider.

Chewbacca and his Tochthon warriors began to emerge from the forest's cover, drawing their circle ever-closer and eliminating any Yags who tried to escape into the woods. The surviving Aeolies were becoming glutted and

satiated with their feast, moving slowly now, and the Tochthons looked like having a task of mopping up.

As their mount began to rise majestically, Solo tossed a bravura gesture in the Wookiee's direction. "Money play!" he yelled.

Wind slammed into them like a wall of ice and the sun's newly risen brilliance made them squint, but ahead they could make out the fleeing hopper.

"D'you think the bird'll mind if we shoot from here?" The question suddenly sounded so funny to Solo, he began to laugh out loud, but Lee, after a hurried conference with Elil, assured him it would be all right to bring down the skyhopper with lase fire.

"Sooner the better," said the Corellian.

As they drew closer Elil guided the Aeolie right and down, then vectored in on the hopper's starboard side in a sweeping turn that gave the gunmen an ample target. Their energy weapons splashed red fire against the semi-shielded skyhopper.

She veered off, showing them her exhaust ports and pulled a surprise: a gun emplacement cleared her hull just aft of the spoiler and sent a burst of blue flame streaking toward them.

Han grabbed madly for any feathered purchase as the big Aeolie dove, leveled, and swiftly rose again, pulling up in an accelerating curve that tugged at the pit of his stomach, to a position straight in the skyhopper's path.

"Blast 'em!" shouted Lee.

For a second they could see the astonished Yags, gaping at the apparition, then the windscreen disappeared in an explosion of fire, and the hopper, a moment later, followed suit, her drive system going all out in a thunderous flame.

Buffeted by the waves of incandescent air, they hung on doggedly until the chill morning winds dispersed the smoke, and the remains of the small craft drifted earthward, among them, Han was quick to note, an opaque, bluish time module, none whatsoever the worse for wear.

He slapped Lee between the shoulders, "Hey! Nice going! We..." he began, then stopped when he saw that D'Kota Lee was otherwise occupied in a feather-ruffling embrace with his Voolan, Elil.

"Money, money, money...love and money," Han Solo said to no one in particular, smiling happily as the Aeolie began to spiral down.

* * *

"...So my ship was going down -- she really did have a drive malfunction -- and the Yags just took advantage of what fortune threw their way. But lucky for us the Aeolies arrived first." Aboard the *Millennium Falcon*, her drive field embracing them against the theoretic impossibility of hyperspace, the five adventurers relaxed and sorted out their stories.

"I sealed the gomelinite in stasis," Lee continued, "and Elil and I took off with them before the Yags showed up to see what they'd brought down. We hitched a ride to Dunnok, the tradeport, and that's where I scrounged a transport back to Urango. Elil stayed with the Aeolies to keep an eye on the gomelinite until I got back. All very simple." He was lounging on the acceleration couch, an arm about the beautiful Voolan who curled quietly at his side, watching the Corellian with large heliotrope eyes.

Solo, patched and cleaned up, sprawled in the computer service chair. Chance sat cross-legged at his feet sketching the bird woman.

"But why not tell me all that in the first place?" Han objected. "Why all the business about your Voolan being in stasis?"

Lee shrugged and smiled slightly. "Just something Chance said once, about your romantic nature." The Corellian snorted derisively. "I thought it might help you to make your mind up quicker."

"Your sister's full of star-shuck, in case you didn't know by now, Lee. The money's where it's at for me, always has been, always will be."

The Voolan, Elil, had leaned closer to her lover and, behind a graceful three-fingered hand, was whispering, never taking her eyes from Solo.

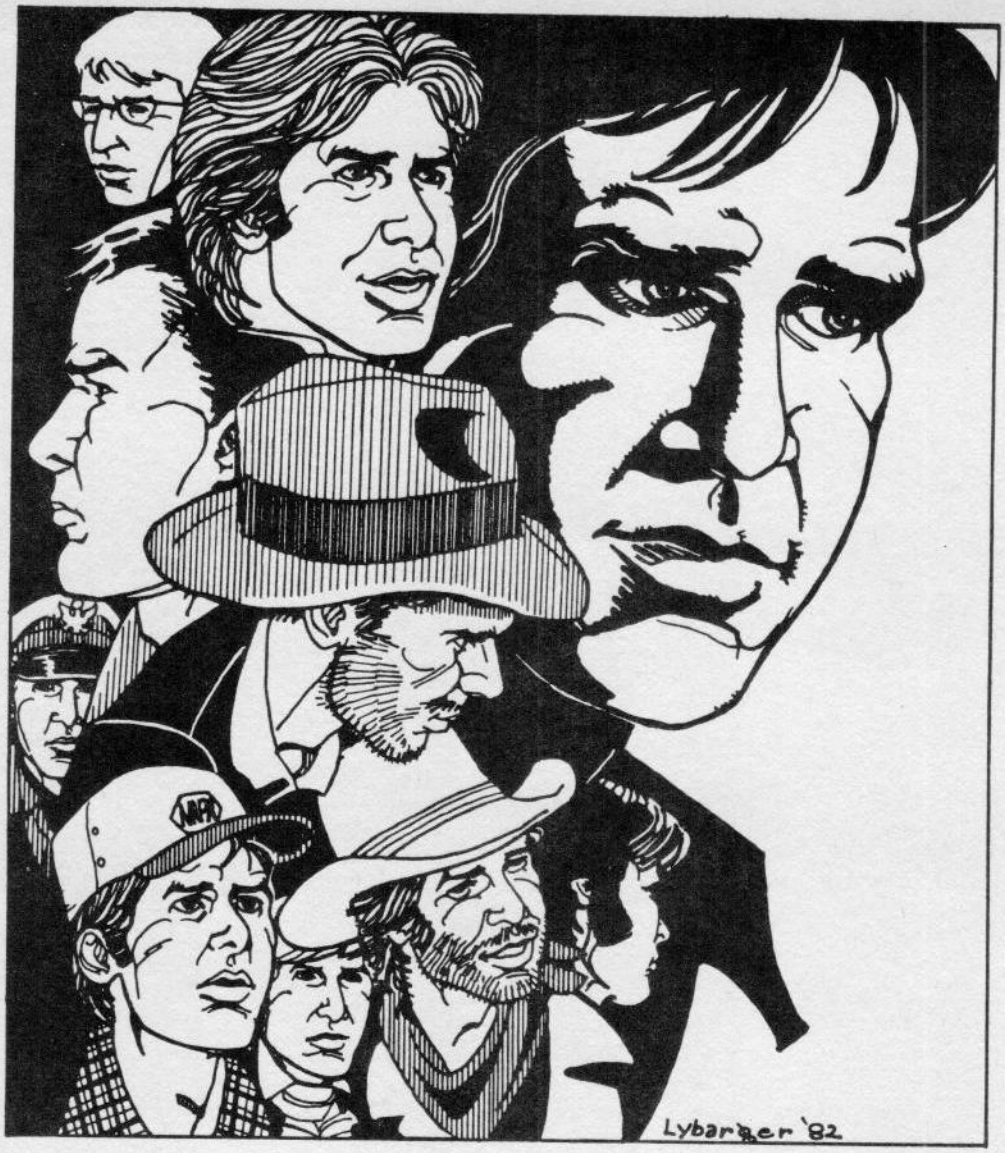
Lee looked surprised. "Sure he has one. All human males have one," he replied to her question. She emitted a musical chirping which might have been a laugh.

"What's she talking about?" Han wanted to know.

"Your nose, Solo. What else?"

Chewbacca, counting gomelinite in one corner, *ha-rooped* with delight.

Lybarger '81



LAST MINUTE ADDITIONS: The above Fordian collage by Wanda Lybarger is slated as the front cover of our last issue, #12, due out May 1984. We will also be offering it as a T-shirt at that time. If you would like one, we will require a $5 deposit by February 1984, and a SASE to let you know final cost. It shouldn't run over about $8. Color will be announced later, but we're leaning to beige/brown.

FACETS #12 will again require a deposit -- sorry, folks, but the printer wants his money. If you wish to reserve an issue, we are now taking $5 deposit plus SASE for final price notification. We will accept reservations until February 1984, at which time we will assume you don't want one. There will only be as many printed as have been pre-ordered to the neares 100, and any leftovers will be sold at Media '84. We will be featuring most of your favorites, including Martynn, Paulie, Wanda Lybarger, Martie Benedict, Jean Stevenson, Susan Perry-Lewis, Barbara Fister-Liltz, and many many more. We intend to go out in style, and cover as many of HF's films as we can. We have tentatively slated selections based on or extrapolated from SW, RAIDERS, APOCALYPSE NOW, FRISCO KID, HANOVER STREET, TESB, and HEROES.

Guess that's about it, folks. See you next time!

There will be no #12 - Sorry